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OUT INTO THE FULL GLOW OF THE CAMP-FIRE STEPPED A MAN, HIS EMPTY HANDS
RAISED ABOVE HIS HEAD, AS THE TRIO OF REVOLVERS COVERED HIM

or,
Dan Brown's Fight for Life.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
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"REVOLVER ROB," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CAMP OF THE COWBOYS.

A GREEN island in the yellow desert of sand—that godsend to the prairie traveler, furnishing water, wood and grass. A few acres of ground which blossomed like a garden in the midst of desolation. In the center a living spring, whose overflowing waters formed a miniature lake. Around this a circle of fresh, crisp grass, surrounded by the trees, whose branches inclined toward the life-giving waters. A fringe of stunted trees and thick shrubbery, dwindling down as they grew further from the moisture, until only a straggling, sickly growth of yellowing grass fought back the encroaching sand of the desert.

Above the tree-tops hung a little cloud of dissolving smoke, though only a keen eye could have detected this in the fast-deepening twilight.

From the shadows came the sounds of both human and animal life.

Three men are squatting around the little camp-fire, enjoying their evening meal, tin cup of steaming coffee in one hand, beef fresh from the glowing coals in the other, eating as only men can who are blessed with the appetite of a wolf, the digestion of an ostrich, and the stowage-room of the anaconda, or its human prototype, the prairie Indian.

Hard by grazed as many horses, greedily cropping the juicy grass, now and then biting or kicking at each other, uttering little squeals of half-anger, half-sport, but making the most of what experience tells them is only a temporary camp, for their saddles and bridles are still in place, though the girths of the first are loosened and the bits of the other hang jingling as they graze.

Here and there amid the trees and bushes show other forms, red, spotted and brindled, tall, long-limbed and gaunt, but one and all bearing the insignia which can never be mistaken, the long, slender, wide-spreading horns of the Texan cattle.

They are few in number—not more than half a score, all told—yet this seems a strange range for cattle; even so small a herd would have hard and scanty foraging when those few acres of ground were picked clean.

This fact might well have puzzled a novice. Not so one well versed in stock lore. The total absence of those disfiguring marks—the scars of the curiously twisted branding-iron—would have told the tale.

A camp of cowboys, yes; but of a peculiar branch of that wild profession. These three men were, to the majority of their class, what the privateer is to the regular navy, the guerrilla to the army in time of war. In other and plainer words, they were what is technically known as "Maverick-hunters," searching for, and collecting unbranded, unclaimed cattle and driving them to a market—a wild, but not necessarily dishonest life.

"Good evening, gentlemen!"

Down drop food and drink as these words come from out the deepening shadows, up leap the cowboys, and each right hand clasps a cocked revolver as they face the point from whence broke the totally unexpected sound.

"Flag of truce, gentlemen," and the words were accompanied by a soft, pleasant laugh. "I'm quite alone, and entirely harmless, I assure you."

"Show your sign-board then! Han's up an' empty fingers!" cried one of the Maverick-hunters, sternly and suspiciously, every muscle of his lithe, sinewy figure quivering in readiness for swift action in case of need.

Prompt as the challenge came the answer. Out into the full glow of the camp-fire stepped a man, his empty hands raised above his head, a smile of amusement upon his handsome face as the trio of revolvers covered him.

"Steady—as you air!" added the challenger, sharply. "Keep your posish, stranger, unless you're hankerin' fer a lightnin' trip over the range! Skin out, boys, an' see ef thar's any more o' his kind in the dark."

"Don't shoot my horse by mistake," laughed the stranger as the two cowboys stole swiftly away. "I left him back at the edge of the timber, while I came ahead to see if this fire was started by friends."

"We kin tell that better when the boys come back," grumbled the Maverick-hunter, keeping the stranger covered with a hand as steady as fate. "Ef you're all squar', you hain't nothin' to fear. Ef not—"

The short nod with which the hiatus was filled, was far more eloquent than words, but the stranger did not appear at all alarmed for the outcome. A laughing light filled his blue eyes, and his white teeth gleamed beneath his trimly kept mustaches.

A short spell of waiting thus, then the two men returned.

"Jess so—hoss hitched—nary other critter in sight," said one, speaking with a curious, gasping hitch in his tones that well matched his nervously jerking, rickety carcass.

"Are you satisfied?" asked the stranger.

The revolver was lowered, uncocked and returned to its resting-place. The cowboy nodded shortly and resumed his seat before the fire, but there was no answering smile upon his weather-beaten but handsome countenance as he said:

"Ef the boys is satisfied, I ain't no call to grumble. But all the same, it was a fool trick on your part. Ef I could 'a' spotted your kiver with sartinty, afore you spoke the second time, you'd 'a' chawed lead sure!"

"Perhaps it was," and once more that soft laugh bubbled forth. "But I saw that you were honest fellows, and I knew I could call myself the same. Then—I haven't eaten a mouthful since daylight, and an empty stomach knows no prudence, especially with the smell of hot coffee and meat—"

"Brush your britches an' set down. Grub's plenty, an' free as the air," was the blunt interruption.

"Don't care if I do, since you are so pressing. It's unhealthy talking on a day-old breakfast."

For some minutes there was silence, but the eyes of the four men were to the full as busy as their jaws.

Briefly summed up, this was the result of their mutual inspection.

The stranger was a man apparently not far along in the thirties, in complexion of the purest blonde, with short, curling hair of flaxen hue, and a handsome pair of mustaches, shading a small, woman-like mouth, with lips as red as though they had been painted. His eyes were deep blue, his features clear-cut and regular, forming a face almost too beautiful for a man. His figure was grace itself, and might have served a sculptor as a model for Apollo. This, with his neat and plain, yet costly dress, caused the lips of the rough cowboys to curl with poorly concealed scorn.

If he noticed this sentiment, his countenance gave no signs of the fact as he coolly inspected his hosts.

One of these, the man who had held him under his revolver while the other two searched the timber island, seemed rather above his class. Standing full six feet, he seemed the very beau-ideal of a plainsman. Dark as an Indian, save where the broad-brimmed felt hat shaded his high brow; jetty hair which curled gracefully at the ends as it rested upon his broad shoulders; with drooping mustaches and Vandyke pointed beard; with silk-embroidered flannel shirt, open at the throat; Indian tanned buckskin trousers, neatly worked with silk and beads

and fringed at the seams; heavily spurred boots, leather belt supporting knife and brace of revolvers, of Colt's navy pattern; with a short-handled, long-lashed whip hanging across one shoulder and under his arm; he, too, seemed open to the suspicion of dandyism, but not so among those who knew him best.

In any gathering, he would have been noted as an unusually handsome, graceful athlete, but doubly so now when contrasted with his mates.

One was short and squat, with stumpy legs widely bowed, as though he had been trained to the saddle from infancy. His face was covered to the eyes with a mass of coarse, bristling hair, and his throat and breast, where exposed by his loose shirt, were shaggy as those of a bear. His eyes were small, jet-black, bright as those of a serpent. All in all, a man of whom one felt an instinctive dread and disgust at first view.

Even more remarkable in appearance was the third of the Maverick-hunters. If the many kinks in his skeleton-like frame were straightened out, and he stood erect, he would have closely crowded seven feet in altitude. His head was monstrous in size, though his face was small, and bore a scanty crop of hair so light as to seem white, though he was the youngest man in the party. His hands and feet were huge, bony and misshapen, while each joint appeared greatly swollen as with rheumatism. Between each joint were only thin layers of muscle, the flesh having seemingly wasted away. From head to foot he was in constant motion, his person twitching and jerking after a most extraordinary manner, while his organs of speech were afflicted after the same fashion. In walking he made short, swift motions as though each member was determined on choosing its own course, wholly independent of its fellows, and to a stranger it looked as though he was just on the point of falling to pieces like a joint-snake.

No word was spoken until the stranger drew back with a sigh of complete satiety. Then the handsome cowboy said:

"This, stranger," indicating the dwarfed Hercules, "is my pard, Long-legs, named that a-way 'cause he ain't got no legs to speak of. He ain't so hefty fer good looks, but he'll do to tie to in a tight pinch every time! With him at my back I wouldn't fear to fight the devil himself! This 'ne," as he nodded toward the loose, gangling specimen of humanity, "is Rickety Joe, the lady-killer an' heart-smasher of the West. Take him in a red-hot crowd and turn him loose, an' he jest paralyzes the outfit. Afore anybody kin tell which is him, an' which is his shadder, Joe gits in his pritty work, an' the job is jobbed clear up to the han'le. As fer me, jest call me Dick Wheeler an' you've got the right pig by the ear."

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, gentlemen," said the stranger, covering his lips with one hand as he yawned lazily. "Thousand times obliged to you for my supper. And now, if you will kindly do me another favor—"

"Did you ketch his name, mates?" asked Wheeler, turning away with a shrug of the shoulders. "Reckon my ears is gone back onto me to-night!"

The traveler laughed easily as he replied: "I beg your pardon, I'm sure. I am so eager to reach my destination that I forgot to return the compliment."

"Nobody's crowdin' of ye, stranger," was the short, rude reply. "You ain't the fust man in these parts as hes a reason fer hidin' of their names."

A look of blank astonishment came into the big blue eyes, but then, although the point just pricked him, he said:

"You do me too much honor, my dear sir. I am neither a runaway convict, nor a prairie pirate, but simple Jack Robinson, bound for the lively little town of Rocky Bar, on a prospecting tour. I expected to take dinner there, but somehow, with my usual blundering luck, lost my way and wandered aimlessly on, in hopes of turning up somewhere, until I caught sight of the smoke of your camp-fire. You know the rest."

While he was speaking Dick Wheeler looked him steadily in the face, as though trying to read below the surface.

"You're right down sure?" he demanded.

"Of what?" quietly asked the stranger. "Pray explain."

"You made one mistake in straying from the right trail to Rocky Bar. Sure you ain't off the trail ag'in?"

"Of your meaning, most decidedly! If not that, pray what trail are you alluding to?"

"The trail o' truth—"

"In other words, you hint that I am lying?" and there flashed a dangerous light into the blue eyes.

"I don't hint. What I want to say I spit right out flat-footed. You give your name as Jack Robinson. I ain't got nothin' ag'inst the name. It's as good as any other to travel under in these regions—"

"Then why are you objecting to it?" sharply.

"Tain't often that I fergit a face when I once see it," was the quiet response, "an' I've seen yours afore when you sailed under another title—"

"Indeed!" sneered Robinson. "Since your memory is so remarkable for its tenacity, perhaps you will kindly set me right. If I'm not myself, but some other fellow, surely I have a right to know it."

"Jest one word'll settle it. On your honor as a man, ain't you the detective they call Nor' West Nick?"

"If I am I must have been changed in my cradle when I was sleeping," laughed the traveler. "My name is Jack Robinson. I'm trying to find my way to Rocky Bar. If you can set me on the right track I'll thank you heartily, or pay you in more substantial coin, if you prefer."

"We're bound fer that same burgh ourselves, an' ef you like, you kin ride in good comp'ny," said Wheeler, a pleasant smile coming into his face, as he held out his hand. "Shake, Jack! I thought I knowed ye, but when a man tells me I'm on the wrong track I ain't bull-headed enough to stick it out."

Their hands met in a warm pressure. "No harm done. I've heard of this Nor' West Nick, as he is called, and since we must resemble each other closely, to deceive a clear-headed fellow like you, I'm anxious to meet him. Have you any reason to think he is in these parts?"

"No more than hearin' that he was sent fer by

some of the big stock-men, to hunt out these dirty imps which go rampagin' 'round the kentry onder the pizen cuss as calls hisself Cap'n Slyboots. They tuck a lot o' Mavericks from us, only week afore last, an' I was in hopes you was the man. Ef you was, we'd enlist onder ye, for three years or the war—sure!"

"Sorry to disappoint you," said Robinson, laughingly. "I'm on a more profitable, if not quite so romantic a mission. Looking for a good, paying mine, to invest some spare cash, and hearing that I could be suited at Rocky Bar, I am bound there."

"Look out fer wildcats, then," laughingly. "Heaps of 'em thar, an' you'll git sucked in an' come out scratched clean, ef you don't keep your two eyes open."

"Maybe I'm not so green as I look," quietly. "I've been there before, metaphorically speaking. Those who pull the wool over my eyes must get up before daylight."

"Hope you'll make a ten-strike, sartin, but they don't many of 'em do it. More money in roundin' up Mavericks. Beef is beef in these mining strikes, an' in the hide of yander black bull, we've got a week's wages wropped up. Sold to a hash-house-keeper, over in Rocky Bar. That's why we're goin' thar to-night. The others 'll stop here easy enough ontel they've picked the feed clean, whether they're watched or not."

"Get your hoss, an' fetch him up here. We won't be long in gittin' ready fer a start. Cut out the black bull, boys."

Jack Robinson turned away from the fire and entered the shadows, soon returning with his horse. He found the three men preparing their mounts for the road, Long-legs and Rickety Joe mounting with their lassoes coiled ready for use.

"Work it easy, boys!" cried Wheeler, taking the lasso from his saddle-bow and separating the coils with his fingers. "He's got the devil in him bigger'n a woodchuck, an' ef he smokes what you're up to, thar'll be music in the air!"

"Ef he makes a break this way, take him, an' we'll be on han' in a hurry," said Long-legs, as he trotted off.

"Jest what I 'low to do. Stan' out whar you kin see the fun, stranger. Lord! wouldn't I like to see that bull in the ring, down Mexico-way! Wouldn't he make the Greasers hump tharselves—that's him—the black beauty!"

Dexterously cut out from the small herd by the two cowboys, a magnificent black bull, trim-built and supple as a deer in every motion, trotted into the open, halting with a snort of angry suspicion.

Too late to save itself. Out from the shadows shot two snake-like coils. Settling fairly over the wide-spreading horns, the loops tightened from opposite sides, and with a wild bellow the angry creature began to plunge and leap, striving in vain to shake off the choking fetters.

"Good work," cried Robinson, his blue eyes glowing.

"But this is better!" grated the voice of Dick Wheeler, as his lasso closed around the body of the astonished man, pinning his arms to his sides and then overthrowing him ere he could fairly realize his peril. "Can't nobody pull the wool over your eyes, ye cussed thief, can't they? Oh, no!"

Wheeler grated out these words as he leaped upon the prostrate form, tearing the weapons from his belt and casting them aside, then grasping him by the throat with deadly force.

Whatever he might have done with an equal chance, the traveler was helpless now against the Maverick-hunter, and choked to insensibility he revived only to find himself tied hand and foot.

"What do you mean by this outrage—"

Wheeler cut him short with a heavy slap on the lips.

"The less chin you give, the healthier it'll be fer you, darn ye! Tried to pull the wool over my eyes, didn't ye? But it wouldn't work! You lied, clean up to the han'le, but what I said, that I'll live up to! You wanted to go to Rocky Bar—"

"And you promised to guide me there—"

"Which I'm goin' to do, an' take you thar in style, too!" laughed the cowboy—a laugh full of malignant glee. "You see that bull Maverick? Waal, you're goin' to enter Rocky Bar ridin' that identical critter—tail-on-end, too, bet ye!"

Despite his nerve, the prisoner trembled, as well he might.

CHAPTER II.

FRIGHTFUL HUMOR OF THE DESERT.

BUT only for an instant. Then the iron nerve of a man in whose veins flowed not one drop of cowardly blood reasserted itself, and his blue eyes met the malignant gaze of the Maverick-hunter unflinchingly.

"What do you mean? Speak plainer."

Dick Wheeler laughed—a laugh with a devilish sneer in its notes for a sting—before replying:

"Reckon it must 'a' shook the wits clean out o' ye, my takin' ye so onexpectedly by surprise, or you wouldn't need to ax any sech question. But it don't matter. I'd jest as soon sling a little chin-music at ye as not, afore the circus opens in good earnest. Easy, while I lend ye a boost—so," and as he spoke, the cowboy raised the prisoner and propped his back against the chunk of dead wood which had not long since served him as a seat.

"Take a look at the boys, an' see what pains they're takin' to break in the critter you're goin' to ride to Rocky Bar. Mebbe it'll pint the tale an' adorn the moral o' what I've got to tell ye," chuckled Wheeler, drawing back a few feet and squatting on his heels.

Long-legs and Rickety Joe were still busied with the Maverick, that animal making a desperate fight for freedom, rearing and plunging, making short rushes here and there, only to be checked by the taut lariats as the well-trained horses exerted their strength in opposite directions. Slowly but surely the tortured creature was being subdued. Its breath could only come in short, gurgling gasps. A few moments more and it would suffocate.

The trained eye of Dick Wheeler saw this, and a short cry broke from his lips. It was a signal well understood by his mates, and promptly acted upon. At a moment when the nose of the choking creature was touching the ground, the two cowboys swung swiftly around to the rear at the full length of their lassoes, Long-legs lying low in the saddle as they

neared each other, while Rickety Joe raised his lariat over the head of his comrade's horse, then each speeding on until rather more than a half-circuit had been made, when the legs of the bull were hopelessly entangled, and he fell heavily.

It was a cunning trick, neatly performed, and while his mates were still further winding up the Maverick, Dick Wheeler turned to his captive with an approving nod.

"They ain't much to look at, by them as sets store on beauty, them two boys ain't, but when it comes down to neat work in their own line, I'd back them against any other two in seventeen States."

"What's that got to do with me?" impatiently demanded Jack Robinson. "You didn't yank me off my feet just to show me that trick, did you?"

"Why not?" and the cowboy grinned significantly. "You're so fond o' cattle that I reckoned you could appreciate fine tetches like them. Ef ye do, jest let me know, won't ye?"

The prisoner made a sudden and desperate effort to burst or slip his bonds, but in vain. Grinning, Dick Wheeler sat still, watching him, with implicit confidence in his work.

"It's not the rope I mind so much," said Robinson, his coolness suddenly restored. "I could stand that well enough without kicking, but it's having to listen to the idle vaporings of a fool's tongue that cuts. Once more I ask you, why have you treated me thus? If you can't give me a straight-forward answer, don't open your jaws at all."

The eyes of the Maverick-hunter opened widely at this sharp speech, but then, with a short laugh, he replied:

"Short an' sweet, but I kin match it. I roped you, fust, to squar' a old grudge; second, to keep you from stealing our cattle ag'in; an' last, because that's the wages of a year's hard work roundin' up set onto your head. We'll take in that little pile, an' then call our account squared—see?"

The countenance of the prisoner changed swiftly while the Maverick-hunter was speaking. From angry surprise to open-eyed wonder, then to a certain grim amusement as he said:

"What mare's nest have you found now? A little while ago I was the detective, Nor' West Nick. Now I am—whom?"

"Cap'n Slyboots!" came the swift response.

"I reckoned as much," sneered Robinson, "when I heard you get off that rigmarole. Bah! man, are you crazy?"

"Nyther crazy nor drunk ef the court knows itself."

"But I swear to you that I am no more Captain Slyboots than you are," protested the captive with earnestness, realizing at length the full nature of the peril which threatened him. "My name is Jack Robinson. I'm a speculator, looking for a paying investment in mines, acting as agent for a New York company. Give me time to send a message to the nearest telegraph station, and the answer will show that I am what I claim to be."

"Give you time fer the devil to come to the help o' his favor-ight imp, you mean!" bluntly interposed Wheeler. "No, no, my covey; that cat won't jump! I've got your brand an' markin's down here," tapping his forehead. "Two weeks ago you got the best of us, but now it's our turn to make the trumps. You're Cap'n Slyboots. They want you p'izen bad in Rocky Bar. So bad, that they're ready to pay big money fer the man as interduces you to 'em. We said we'd show you the way to the town, an' we never go back on our word when it once passes. We'll put you on the right trail, and take mighty good care that you don't stray from it before you git to the end too—bet your life!"

"A bit ago you were ready to swear that I was Nor' West Nick, but you are still further from the truth now."

The cowboy cut him short with a mocking laugh. "An' you're the critter as was so sure nobody couldn't pull the wool over your eyes, while all the time I was blowin' smoke into your peepers! Lord! it'd make a love-sick mule laugh till its sides cracked wide open, jest to think how p'izen slick I tuck back the misstep I made at fust sight o' your mug. I knowed you at the fust jump, but it come so unexpected that I couldn't help showin' out some of it. You played your part well, an' you kin thank that fer your bein' still alive an' kickin', fer at the fust show of 'spicion on your side, you'd 'a' chawed lead, sure! To make sure that you didn't hev your gang along, I sent out the boys, an' when they said you was playin' a lone hand, I made up my mind to take you alive, ef it could be done. To settle your mind, I pertended I thought you was Nor' West Nick."

"Are you nearly through?" impatiently broke in the other.

"Time enough fer the circus, never you fret," coolly replied the Maverick-hunter, glancing toward his mates, who were still busied with the fallen bull.

With swift dexterity they wound the bull up in their lassoes so thoroughly, that it could scarcely move a muscle. It lay on its side, quivering, gasping for breath, the air passing through its contracted windpipe with a whistling sound.

While Rickety Joe still kept up the controlling strain, his mate leaped from the saddle and wound a blanket tightly around the eyes of their captive, blinding it effectually.

"They're mighty good boys, all two both on 'em," said Wheeler, with a nod toward his mates, "but they're slow to see through a tangle. They hed no idee of the game I was playin' with you, ontel I sent you off after your hoss. Then I gave them the hint, an' they jumped at the chaine for some fun, even while gittin' even with you fer the Mavericks you run off fer us."

"Look here: just one word. If you really think you have got hold of Captain Slyboots in catching me, by this contemptible trick, you're mistaken. Either that, or you are willfully lying for a purpose of your own. In either case, I swear to get even with you for this outrage."

"Which you're quite welcome to try it on, after the boys at Rocky Bar git through with you!" retorted Wheeler, with a significant laugh. "Talk enough! You wanted to go to town. I promised to show you the way, an' I'm goin' to do it. The boys is ready. The critter you're ride is ready, an' you soon will be!"

The jaws of the prisoner set themselves firmly. The stern light deepened in his big blue eyes. He

knew that there was no use in wasting his breath in further argument. Either the Maverick-hunter was firmly convinced that he was the notorious road-agent and cattle-thief, or he had some secret motive for affecting that belief. In either case he was helpless, and he nerved himself to meet the terrible ordeal which he saw was before him.

"Lend a hand, Long-legs!" cried Wheeler, springing to his feet. "Rickety Joe kin manidge the Maverick. I'm in a hurry to git the circus a-goin'."

Looking more repulsive than ever as he showed his crooked, tobacco-stained teeth, the squat Hercules came forward, bending over the prisoner and staring into his face with a savage grin.

"I knowed it'd come, sooner or late, when you jumped us that night, an' left us without hoss or horn. I swore then to git even, an' I'll make that swear good this night, or I'll never whirl another hide-splitter!"

"That's enough, pard," interrupted Wheeler. "I've done the talkin' fer the hull outfit. It's work now."

Stout thongs of half-dry hide were tied tightly around each wrist and ankle of the captive, and then, while maintaining a firm grip on their victim, the lasso was unwound from around his body. Nor were these precautions unnecessary.

The instant the lasso fell off his person, Robinson, with a strength and swiftness remarkable in one so hampered, tore himself free from the cowboys. But before he could improve this advantage Long-Legs kicked his feet from under him, just as Wheeler dealt him a crushing blow on the head with the chunk of wood.

Stunned and senseless, the victim was lifted from the ground and carried over to where the black bull lay. Stretched at full length along the back of the bull, with his head to the rear, Robinson was firmly bound in position by the nimble-fingered cowboys, face downward.

His feet were placed one on each side of the animal's neck, connected by a strong thong which passed from ankle to ankle, around the throat of the Maverick. With some difficulty, owing to the position in which the animal lay, his arms were fastened in much the same manner, the thong passing beneath the bull at his flanks.

"Git to your hoss, Legs," cried Wheeler. "Let the critter up, but keep up the strain on his wind ontel I fix the rest."

His orders were promptly obeyed. The lassoes were unwound, the bull was suffered to scramble to its feet, though trembling in every muscle and fearful to move, owing to the blinding blanket with which its head was still enveloped.

Working rapidly, yet doing all with a thoroughness characteristic of himself, Dick Wheeler bound the prisoner to his novel charger with fold after fold of the stout lasso, then, with a wild, reckless laugh, he tore the blanket from the head of the bull and slipped the two lariats from around its neck.

"Hurray, boys!" he shouted as he leaped into the saddle and swung his whip through the air with a pistol-like crack. "A hull circus all to our own selves, an' not a durned cent to pay fer lookin' at it an' takin' it all in!"

As that well-known and dreaded sound stung through the night-air, the Maverick tossed its head high, uttering a wheezing bellow.

"No crowdin', mates!" added Wheeler, warningly. "Give the critter time to git good an' ready. Tain't often we hev sech a high-toned cuss as Cap'n Slyboots to entertain, an' we want to round up the trip in heap style."

Its flanks heaving rapidly as it sucked in the grateful air, its long tail switching to and fro, its bloodshot eyes glowing viciously as it glared around at its tormentors, now swaying its back low, now arching it with an ominous quiver as it felt the unaccustomed weight, the Maverick was rapidly recovering from the terrible choking it had undergone before succumbing. And quivering all over with a satanic glee as they anticipated the barbarous sport in store, the cowboys waited—not for long.

With a hollow bellow, the Maverick lowered its head, shook its long, sharp horns, then plunged straight at Dick Wheeler.

Instinctively the well-trained horse leaped to one side. Up rose the strong right arm of the desperado, moving a few inches forward, then back again. Doubling on itself, the long lash of plaited rawhide hissed through the air, and the horn-like cracker struck the bull in the forehead with a report like that of a rifle, cutting away the curled hair in a little cloud, and leaving a bloody spot to mark its power.

With another bellow—of pain and terror now—the black bull turned and rushed away, crashing through the shrubbery and out upon the moonlit prairie. Close at its heels thundered the cowboys, yelling like veritable fiends, plying their terrible whips so swiftly that it sounded like a hotly-engaged skirmish line. And on the back of the fleeing animal lay the helpless form of that man. Guilty or innocent, he was to be pitied now!

"My head ag'inst a chaw terbacker I kin cut off that tail coat-button an' never fetch blood!" yelled Long-legs, looking more than ever like a hideous ape as he leaned far forward in the saddle, the brilliant moonlight falling full upon his hideous countenance as the broad brim of his soft felt hat was blown back by the breeze created by his swift passage.

Only those who have witnessed the true "bull-whacker" whip, and the manner of using it by an expert, can form any idea of what a terrible weapon it can become. They are not as common now as in the bygone days when freighting over the plains was a regular profession, and have gone almost out of use, even among cattle-men or cowboys. Let this fact serve as an apology for a brief digression.

A handle of hickory, eighteen inches long. A lash of rawhide, or buckskin in some instances, as many feet in length. Not more than half an inch in thickness where it joins the handle, it gradually swells until one-third of its length, where it is from two to three inches in diameter, according to the strength of arm or the taste of its owner, then tapering down to the slender cracker. With this, to a novice, clumsy and unmanageable contrivance, an expert can pick a fly off an ox without disturbing a hair, or he can cut a gash through the thickest hide deep and wide enough to lay one's forefinger in. On one oc-

casional the writer saw the ears of an ugly steer cut off close to the head, in two successive strokes, as clean as though a knife had been used to perform the amputation.

Many persons, including several of our writers of Western life, who are less excusable for making such a blunder, seem to think that the term "bullwhacker" is applied in the West to mule-drivers. The word found birth in the early days of 'fifty-nine and 'sixty, when the freighting to Pike's Peak and other gold regions first began. The freighting was then almost wholly done by ox teams, as those animals were deemed alone capable of withstanding the terrible work of the desert. To the drivers of these teams the term was first applied. To them, and now and then to stock-men or cowboys, the title is confined, and if the aforesaid writers could see the curling lip of the true Westerner as he reads of a *mule* bullwhacker, the misapplication would be less frequent.

On sped the Maverick, running low and true, with long-reaching strides, very unlike the awkward, up-and-down gallop of its prototype in the States. On thundered the cowboys, yelling like fiends, plying their terrible whips, the cutting lash striking now the bull, now the helpless wretch stretched along its back.

"Whoop! didn't I tell ye so?" yelled Long-legs, as he shot his lash forward and with unerring aim severed one button from the coat of the captive.

"See ye—go one better!" jerked forth Rickety Joe, stretching one knotty arm behind him until the long lash trailed at full length. "Bet I kin—bite his—ear off!"

"Go slow, mate!" cried Wheeler, with wonderful dexterity circling his whip and intercepting the whistling lash as it shot forward on its barbarous mission, jerking the weapon from its owner's hand. "None o' that, my lad! Tain't that I'm in love with the p'izen cuss, but I've sworn to turn him over to the boys at Rocky Bar alive an' in good condition. Tickle him all you like, but don't go more than skin-deep, or thar'll be a good-sized row in the family—*you hear me preach!*"

On swept the mad chase. On, over the sandy waste in the clear moonlight. On until the ground grew broken and rocky. Still on, the black hide of the Maverick growing lighter in color as the sweat turns to froth, streaked here and there with the blood that trickles from the gashes which those terrible whips have scored in its hide. Panting, its flanks painfully heaving, its tongue lolling, its eyes wildly protruding, blood dripping from its distended nostrils, racing for life in the vain attempt to shake off its dreaded pursuers—on races the tortured animal.

Now in the rear, now on either side, ride the reckless cowboys, enjoying as only half-brutish men can enjoy, their frightful humor, yelling, laughing, screeching, whirling their blood-stained whips, now gashing the Maverick to arouse its failing strength, now "tickling" the hapless prisoner, hoping to draw a cry of pain from his lips, or wring from them an appeal for mercy.

But not a sound escapes him. They might have believed him dead, only for the defiant, threatening glitter which they see in his eyes as they ride close and bend in the saddle to solve their doubts.

Woe unto them if ever he has an opportunity of striking a blow in return for this devilish torture.

But they are none of them men who look beyond the present, or deny their passions because of a future. Much less now, when their worst passions are fully aroused. With certain death before them, they would not hold their hands.

Still on! Would that frightful ordeal *never* come to an end? Swifter runs the bull, faster follow the pursuers. Whiter grows the face of the victim. Louder the whip-cracks!

CHAPTER III.

THE "JEALOUS GIRL" MINE.

"WELL, sir, it depe ds. If you are thinking of making the deal on your own hook, I can't say that I would recommend it."

"But you *did* recommend it, Mr. Brown, as r can show you in black and white—in good, plain writing, over your own signature, sir!" a little excitedly retorted the other.

"Exactly; but that was a month or more ago—time enough for the world to turn itself end for end several times over," was the cool response. "You asked my opinion as a man of business, and I gave it, supposing you wished the truth. The Jealous Girl is for sale, if any one cares to pay the figure, but I won't lie about it for the sake of making a trade."

The speakers were seated in a room at the Arlington, the one hotel of which the lively little mining town of Rocky Bar could boast, built by an over-sanguine individual in the early days of the great rush, when all predicted a wonderful future for Rocky Bar—"The center of all creation, sah, and bound in nature, sah, to become the hub of America, with the salt water fer the felloes, sah, and such second-class towns as New York and Frisco, sah, will be nothing more than the auger-holes into which fit the spokes—our lines of railway, sah!"

It cost a fortune to freight the building material for the two-story structure, and scarcely was the finishing touch put to it, than the wild excitement of those first days died away, and Rocky Bar settled down on its own bottom. The scanty placer diggings gave out, leaving only several quartz veins worth developing, sufficient to insure the town an existence, but effectually extinguishing the extravagant hopes of the owner of the Arlington. And now, a wreck of his former pompous self, unable to sell, less able to remove his "white elephant" to a more favored locality, Colonel Beverley Tucker Randolph Gordon—to omit or curtail one of his names was a fighting offense still—lived on, not in hopes, but on the memory of those "glorious days befo' the wah, sah!"

By the noon stage two guests arrived at the Arlington, and were received by the host with melancholy dignity, for a single glance was enough to show that they were above the ordinary run of travelers as seen in that wild region. A lady and a gentleman—father and daughter, judging from their ages and the names on the dog-eared register.

"Arthur Ovelman. Esquire—Miss Marjane Ovel-

man—New York city," thus the entry read and ere the owners of these names had been in the house an hour, the melancholy face of the host grew materially brighter, for it was a glimpse of those "glorious days" to receive the gold-promising orders of this Yankee nabob.

The colonel's face was hotly flushed as he returned from his first visit to the rooms chosen by Mr. Ovelman, bearing a sealed and directed note in his hand, but there was a certain grim humor in his watery eyes as he made an entry in his book, muttering the while:

"Paid messenger cash, five dollars, for finding and delivering letter to Daniel Brown, Esquire. When a low-down Yankee puts on such airs over a blue-blooded Southerner, he must pay for the privilege—through his nose!" and nodding approvingly at the entry, the colonel donned his rusty hat and strode majestically away—possibly to hunt up a servant.

Promptly at the hour mentioned in that note, Dan Brown, of Denver, as he was known throughout the West, entered the Arlington and was shown to the room where Arthur Ovelman was awaiting his coming, and where we now find them.

Slight change had the passage of time effected in the celebrated detective since his last bow before the reader. He was still the handsome, resolute-looking man who might have just emerged from the streets of the metropolis, with the grace of an Apollo, the dress of a society gentleman, but over all the air of a quiet self-reliance that told of one who had been thoroughly tested and not yet found wanting.

Arthur Ovelman was something more than an ordinary-looking personage. Probably fifty years of age, with iron-gray hair cut close to his head, with small, closely-clipped side-whiskers, the rest of his broad, massive face being clean shorn. Not a pleasant face, though the features were regular enough, and might have been called handsome, without violating the truth. The jaws were too firmly set. The eyes too cold and changeless. The mouth too straight, the lips too hardly compressed. No one would look to him the second time for pity or kindly words or sympathy. No criminal would hope to have his appeal for mercy listened to.

His garb was in perfect keeping—rich, yet severely plain. All over he looked the man who had but one god—himself; but one servant—business; but one weakness—that of suspecting everybody with whom he came in contact, of trickery.

This trait betrayed itself as he looked from the card which Dan Brown handed him into the owner's face.

Softly the detective laughed, as he answered the unspoken suspicion:

"You expected a rough, and you find—your humble servant," with a low bow. "Must I produce other vouchers for my identity? A certificate of birth, duly sworn to before a justice of the peace? Or will your letters concerning the sale of the mine, Jealous Girl, be sufficient?"

"You have them with you?" gravely asked the capitalist. "Thanks. I may be peculiar, but it is a rule with me to never take an item for granted in business dealings. Marjean, hand me my glasses," he added, turning his head toward the window which looked out upon the street.

A tall, graceful figure came forward with the desired article, and Dan Brown bowed low, his face flushing. Thanks to the folds of the window curtain, together with the dim light of the one oil lamp, he had believed himself alone with Arthur Ovelman. Now, as he saw those glorious dark eyes fixed upon his face with a strange intentness, he felt as though he had been guilty of unpardonable rudeness.

Only for an instant did that peculiar gaze last, then, with a slight inclination of the proud head, in answer to his bow, Marjean Ovelman turned away and resumed her seat at the open window. Yet in that moment Dan Brown had mentally taken her photograph, and this was what he saw:

A woman of some two or three-and-twenty, tall and well-formed; dark hair and eyes, regular features, a beautiful face, whose only fault was the absence of all warm color—yet a face that told of much sorrow or trouble in the past.

"She looked as though she recognized me, or wanted to speak of something of the greatest importance to her; but how can that be?" mused the detective, while the capitalist was closely scrutinizing the letters as though expecting to detect a forgery among them. "I rarely forget a face—never one so lovely as that. We have never met before."

His musings were interrupted by the capitalist. Apparently satisfied that all was correct, he opened the subject of his journey to this remote region, which led to the words with which this chapter opens.

"Has the vein run out, or the grade of ore lowered?"

"Neither. So far as that is concerned, the prospects are even more favorable than when I first made you an offer to sell. The mine is worth thousands more to-day than then."

"If so, what am I to infer? You speak in riddles, sir, and I have neither the time nor the patience to solve them. In one word, what do you mean?" was the irritable query.

"It will take more than one word to explain, so that you can comprehend," equably replied Dan Brown; "but I will be as brief as possible."

"Do so, and you will greatly oblige me, sir."

"The facts of the case are just these, my dear sir. Some party or parties have either got a grudge against me—"

"What has that got to do with the Jealous Girl?"

"If you will have a moment's patience, you shall learn. Remember that I am only a poor, ignorant miner, not a man of business, like yourself," placidly retorted Brown, with the faintest imaginable trace of a sneer in his tones.

"I own the Jealous Girl. It is a valuable piece of property. Whatever damages that, injures me in proportion. Now, I am not a saint. I have stepped on a good many persons' toes, both in the way of business or otherwise, and it looks very much as though some of those parties were trying to get even with me, and at the same time keeping their own bones out of danger. In other words, they are doing their best to ruin the Jealous Girl."

"In what manner?" sharply demanded Ovelman.

"By injuring the works, and impeding operations in every conceivable manner. They are cunning

scoundrels, or else they have confederates among my workmen. If the last, the game is played to perfection, for I can find no clew to crookedness."

"Are these the only grounds for giving me this advice?"

"Not exactly. The most important, however, for it is possible that the objection is to me individually, and so would not be transferred to you, should you conclude to buy."

"Tell me the rest. I never enter into anything blindfold, no matter how slight the interests involved."

"Two of my best men have been killed, shot down by cowardly assassins when in the discharge of their duties, without leaving the faintest clew to the perpetrators of the dastardly crimes. I have been shot at, myself, more than once; but that might have been owing to some other score. That, I believe, is about all."

"Enough, one would think," and Ovelman laughed unpleasantly, with a trace of suspicion in his hard eyes. "Under the circumstances, I wonder that you are not too eager to sell to think of mentioning such trifles!"

"You forget what I told you at the beginning," said Dan Brown, with a kindling light in his blue eyes, and a half-glance toward the window where Marjean sat in silence. "I am not a business man: that may account for the difference."

"It would be a neat stroke for the keenest man of business, though, supposing your first statement true and the last one exaggerated."

"What am I to infer, Mr. Ovelman?" a little sharply.

"That I am only supposing a case, not reflecting upon you in the remotest degree. Say a bargain is half made, for the sale of a mine. The parties are widely separated, and the negotiations require considerable time. During this time, the mine improves and increases in value. The owner is no longer anxious to sell, and so he trumps up some wild tales of wilder lawlessness, to tell the purchaser when he comes to conclude the bargain, hoping thus to frighten him off, or induce him to bid higher."

"In short, that the mine-owner is a cunning scoundrel?" coldly interrupted Dan Brown.

"Or an astute man of business," amended the capitalist.

"I think it is time to end our interview, Mr. Ovelman," and the detective rose to his feet. "You have the advantage of me in this respect: yonder lady is your relative, but a stranger to me. You are free to say what you please, while my tongue is chained by a sense of common politeness."

"My dear sir, pray do not be so hasty," said Ovelman, with more warmth in his tones. "I was only giving you a brief of what my partners would say to me, should I return to them with the tale you have told me. On my honor as a man of business, I meant to cast no reflection upon you."

"The inference was a natural one, you must admit," said the mine-owner, resuming his seat. "I am glad to see that I was in error."

"To business, then. You are still willing to sell?"

"Yes, if you care to take the chances."

"If the mine proves to be all that it is represented, I care little for the rest. I am acting as the agent for a stock company. If the purchase is made the mine will be put in charge of trusty men who will have to take the unknown risks as part of the bargain. The arm of the secret foe will have to be long to reach any of the real owners."

"Very well. I will take you over the works, or you can inspect them by yourself, and at your leisure. I am not anxious to sell, but if you care to hold me to the terms named, the property is yours."

"I should think you would wish to get rid of it, if your suspicions are correct," remarked Ovelman, dryly.

"I've grown interested in the case, from a professional point of view," laughed the detective. "Unless other business interferes, I think I will see the matter to an end, anyway."

"Have you any suspicions as to who is at the bottom of the mystery?"

"Nothing very definite," was the evasive reply. "Somebody whose toes I have trod on, no doubt. Time will tell," and he rose as though to depart, when Ovelman checked him.

"One moment; you have not seen my authority for closing the bargain, provided I found all satisfactory."

"No matter," laughed Brown. "I am quite satisfied."

"But it *does* matter!" was the testy reply. "As a man of business, I must insist. Why, I would be laughed at. I have it here," fumbling in his breast pocket vainly. "I remember, now. It is in my desk, up-stairs. Wait a moment."

As he left the room, the curtain was thrust aside, and Marjean Ovelman came swiftly forward, that strange, anxious light deepening in her eyes, twin red spots on her cheeks.

"Pray do not misjudge me, sir, but listen," she said, hurriedly, with a fearful glance toward the door through which her father had disappeared. "When there is more time, I will explain all, but now—tell me—do you know—have you ever heard of a man named St. Clair Guthrie?"

To say that the detective was astonished by this strange approach and address, it is stating the case very mildly indeed. His first impression was that the woman's brain was unsettled, but that thought was banished when he heard that name—the name of Rocky Bar's most notorious gambler and black-leg.

Marjean noted his hesitation, but put a wrong interpretation upon it. More eager than ever she muttered:

"You are wrong—I am not mad, though I have passed through more than enough to craze the strongest brain. Tell me—I ask it upon my knees!" and she sunk at his feet, with clasped and uplifted hands. "Tell me—it is more than life to a poor, wretched woman—tell me where I can find him!"

Before Dan Brown could speak, the heavy footsteps of the capitalist were heard on the stairs, and springing to her feet, Marjean added, hastily:

"You know, I am sure. Meet me to-morrow. I will send you word when. Until then, as you hope for mercy hereafter, keep my secret!"

With one finger pressed upon her lip, she glided silently back to the window, the curtain falling

about her as the door opened and Arthur Ovelman re-entered the room.

"There you will find my authority for concluding the bargain, with the provisos," said Ovelman, handing Brown the paper. "You will find it satisfactory, I think."

Dan took the paper and affected to scan its contents closely, but it may be doubted whether he saw a word to recognize it. His brain was busy with the strange words and stranger actions of the fair woman who had so recently knelt at his feet, as though she was indeed pleading for more than life. What was the secret connected therewith? What interest could she have in St. Clair Guthrie, notoriously the most immoral man in all Rocky Bar? Surely she could not be—

His confused train of thought was cut short by the hard, sharp voice of Arthur Ovelman, saying:

"Is it not in proper shape? You stare at it as though you thought it a forgery."

With an effort Dan Brown recovered himself.

"Of course it is all right. I was not thinking of that, but simply admiring the regularity of the writing," he answered, at random, but making a center shot by chance.

A smile slightly relaxed the grim mouth.

"Thanks for the compliment, for I wrote the document. Under directions, of course," he added, hastily.

"It was going to unnecessary trouble, but after all, you are right about its being wisest to do such things according to rule. And now, good-evening."

"If you are going down-town, I will walk a few steps with you. These rooms are so stuffy and close, that a trifle of fresh air will not come amiss," and Ovelman donned his hat.

Passing through the bar, they reached the street. Then, acting on a sudden impulse, Dan Brown asked:

"Did you ever hear of a man named St. Clair Guthrie?"

"Not to my knowledge," was the instant response.

"Why do you ask? From any particular reason?"

"No, not that I know of," slowly. "There is a man of that name in town, rather a noted character, too, who claims to hail from New York, and I didn't know but you had heard of him."

"New York is a rather sizable place," dryly returned the capitalist, with a cynical smile, the purport of which the detective readily divined, but he uttered no protest.

"His place is not far off. If you have no objection to viewing the elephant—and we have him big as life in our little mining towns, too—we'll drop in there."

"Not the slightest," was the ready reply. "I sometimes interview the tiger—after business hours, understand."

Motionless as a statue of stone sat Marjean Ovelman at the window of the hotel, her face white as death, drawn with lines of bitter agony, none the less hard to bear because it could find no vent. Unnoted the hours passed by, all unheeded were the wild sounds of the street where the half-drunken miners were making night hideous with their yells and bacchanalian laughter and rude songs. Her brain was busy with the past. A tragic drama was being unfolded before her throbbing brain, scene by scene, act by act.

Suddenly the spell is broken, and her drooping head is lifted with a start, her wild eyes glance up the street, but at first they rest only on vacancy.

A steadily growing clatter and trampling, then her clearing vision beholds a terrible sight.

Down the street dashes a strangely burdened animal, hotly pressed by three horsemen, whose cracking whips keep time to their wild yells and peals of laughter. Directly before the hotel, the bull pauses. Only for a moment, but then, as the light falls upon the white face of the captive—

"Kyrie—merciful Heaven!" and she sinks in a swoon.

CHAPTER IV.

"WHIRLY-GUST O' WOOD-PECKERS."

"Whoo-ee-e! Rip shins an' marrerbones! Wake snakes, the winter's busted loose! Come out o' your holes an' take a good squar' squint at the p'ny-pinny-poppy show—'twon't cost ye a durned cent, unless you try to tickle the trick-muel abaft the gangway, or tromp on the tail o' the rampagin' collywobbles—whoo-ee-e!"

Preceded by and wound up with an ear-splitting scream in close imitation of an enraged stallion, this whimsical outburst attracted all eyes, though the *habitués* of "Aladdin's Cave" were tolerably well used to manifestations of this sort, particularly on Saturday nights, when the average digger feels in duty bound to go "on a tear."

The imitation was so perfect, accompanied as it was by a heavy stamping as of a horse pawing in anger, and winding up with a sharp snort no less clever—all this in a voice which none of those present seemed to recognize, and the attention won by the gasconading stranger is explained.

A giant in height, but stoop-shouldered and narrow-chested for one of his altitude, though this was less apparent than usual now that he stood with widely-separated feet, his head thrown back and chest inflated. His face a mass of black and tangled hair, out of which glittered small eyes and the tip of a rum-painted nose. A new hat of parti-colored felt was cocked over one eye. His thumbs were tucked under his armpits, his long, dirty fingers beating a tattoo on his breast as he stared around the room. His flannel shirt, his corduroy trousers, his long-legged boots, all were new and of fine material. A heavy gold chain was around his neck and hanging in festoons over his breast, vanished in a watch-pocket.

If a drunken miner, one evidently "well-fixed."

"Whoo-ee-e!" once more squealed the stranger, cutting a complicated pigeon-wing with the grace of a drunken giraffe. "The two-legged wab-hoss of the mighty Nor' West! The bloody-mouthed b'ar o' the foot-hills! The gully-whompin' catamount o' 'way up Bitter Crick! The rampin', screamin' mountain lion o' the mornin' star! The double-jawed alligator an' moss-backed tarrapin o' the Big Black Swamp! You pays your money an' you takes your choice, an' when you putt your finger on ary one o' the menadgery, that's *me*, Nor' West Nick, the two-legged whirly-gust o' woodpeckers—got by Thunderstorm out o' Rainbow, cradled in the mount'ins."

with the peak o' Shasta fer a nipple to my nussin' bottle—whoo-ee-ee!"

Breathless he paused, and once more gazed loftily around the spacious apartment as though lord of all he surveyed.

Only for a brief space. The sensation he created was less than he believed his just due, and there was an uglier ring to his tones as he "broke out in a new place."

"Size me up, little 'uns, an' make up your minds that a new sun hes riz over Rocky Bar—that a mighty chief hes come to town, an' come to stay!"

"All wool an' a yard wide, with colors that 'll wash an' cain't be chawed out! Seven foot in the clear, without knot, rot, wind-crack or woodpecker hole! Tough an' woolly an' chuck full o' fleas, an' never was carried above the knees—hyar I come, head up an' tail over the dasher! Whoo-ee-ee!"

Such a series of ungainly cavortings and outlandish gyrations, the human eye seldom looked upon before. Even the most reserved and sober among the audience could not refrain from laughing at the ridiculous display, and as though encouraged by the boisterous cachinnations, the stranger redoubled his efforts, until it seemed as though he would lose some of his wildly twisting members, or trip himself up and break his own neck.

"The old man's drunk again! Sing, brothers—sing!"

In a squeaking, falsetto voice, these words rose above the clattering of the giant's boots, pitched in the regular camp-meeting style, sounding impressively ridiculous in such a place and connection. They smote upon the ear of the capering fellow, and acted on him much as a dash of ice-water does on a fighting dog. Instantly his mad prancings ceased, and he glared around the room, scanning the mirth-convulsed faces with a ferocious scowl as he grated:

"Show me the steam-b'iler as let off that squeal! Set him up afore me, an' somebody prop him up while I tune him to play white man's music. Air you the critter?"

A tall, richly-dressed figure arose from one of the faro tables, and strode across to where the fellow stood. To him the last words were addressed, as the man grasped one of the heavy revolvers with which his belt was garnished.

There was an instant shifting of position on the part of those who were in range or line with the two men, but the iron-nerved gambler—for the new actor on the scene was St. Clair Guthrie, himself—made no motion to touch a weapon. His heavily-mustached lip curled and his blue eyes seemed filled with a lofty scorn as he raised one long white finger and slowly shook it before the man who had announced himself as Nor' West Nick. Soft were his tones, but each word came with the force and directness of a blow.

"Enough is as good as a feast, my man. You have had your innings, and now you want to subside. Understand?"

The giant stared into that icy-calm face with open mouth and a generally bewildered expression, as though totally unable to believe the evidence of his own senses.

"I reckon you don't know who I air, stranger."

"A bag of wind, and unless you bridle your tongue, you can't stop in this establishment. Behave yourself, and it's all right. Cut up any more such capers, and out you go. I expect to keep good order in my place, even if I have to call in the corner and sexton to aid me."

"Was I raisin' a row?" innocently asked the fellow.

"Yes, and making an infernal nuisance of yourself into the bargain," came the sharp answer.

"Waal, I ber durned!" and the mighty Nor' West Nick scratched the rear of his skull with a comical expression of perplexity. "An' all the while I think I was amoosin' the gents fer a change! But you hearn what that squeaky critter said? You tuck in that outrageous insinuation?"

"No matter. If not drunk, you were playing the ass sober, and that is so much worse. I'll let it drop now, but carry yourself a little straighter while here, or you'll get bounced so quick that it'll make your head swim! Now mind," and the proprietor was turning away when the man checked him.

"Say, boss, kin you tell me whar I kin find a two-legged critter named Dan Brown of Denver? I want to see him, bad!"

The slight frown on the brow of the gambler suddenly vanished, and there came a curious light into his steel-blue eyes as he pointed to where the detective sat with Arthur Ovelman at one of the faro tables.

"There is the gentleman. If your business is with him, settle it between yourselves, and don't disturb the rest of my customers."

Straight across the room plunged Nor' West Nick, his hand falling heavily upon the shoulder of Dan Brown.

"You're the man I'm lookin' fer," he began, when a swift motion caused his hand to drop from its resting-place, and the keen gaze of the detective met him fairly.

"And now that you have found me, what is your business?"

Cool and equable came the words, but those who knew him best saw that the apparently careless detective was fully on his guard, ready for any move this wild being might see fit to make.

"Le's git a good ready, fust. You're sure you're the man—Dan Brown of Denver, detective, thief-ketcher, an' so fo'th?" asked Nor' West Nick, emphasizing the name and titles.

"My name is Dan Brown. I have lived in Denver. I have run in an odd rascal at times; shall I do the same for you?"

A low laugh ran around the room, but Nor' West Nick did not seem in the least disconcerted.

"Not this evenin'—some other evenin'. Fact is, I've come all the way from my old stampin'-grounds up in the Nor'west, jest to see you. Thar's bin some monstrous big yarns told of your doin's down in these parts, an' I hearn 'em so often that I reckoned it'd pay a feller to take a tramp down yere to see ef it was all so."

There was a curious light in the eyes of the Denver detective as he listened, and as the other paused, he turned to the table once more.

"You have seen me. If your friends up in the Nor'west ask you what you found out, when you take that long tramp back, just tell them that you don't know."

The black eyes of the fellow glittered more vividly, and his flaming red nose fairly seemed to glow, as he spoke:

"Ef that's common p'liteness, then I'm a durned hog."

"What more do you want?" and there was an ominous ringing in the tones as Dan Brown wheeled around once more.

"Want to talk—an' you've got to lis'en or fight!" Nor' West Nick replied, swiftly.

"Indeed!" sneered Brown, his lip curling. "And if I refuse to do either the one or the other?"

"Then your fri'nds 'll say that you was skeered to take up with a fa'r an' squar' banter from a man as kin prove hisself your ekil in everythin' unless it mought be fine duds an' a woman's face," was the prompt retort, and there was now little of the whimsical or ridiculous in the man's tones.

He had been playing a part, then, or was an entirely different person when in a serious mood, as now.

Dan Brown recognized the change, and his sneer faded.

"If you have business with me, speak out."

"That's the way to talk!" and Nor' West Nick nodded patronizingly. "Short an' sweet an' straight to the mark."

"Try and emulate my example, then," said Dan Brown, sharply. "I'm not over-stocked with patience, and just now these cards have far more attractions for me than the idle maunderings of a gentleman who looks like you, my dear sir!"

"Cap'n Slyboots an' his gang o' Anti Monopolists—they're my game, you understand."

"So?" with a lifting of the eyebrows. "And you are afraid that I will interfere, and by raking them in, deprive you of the coveted glory and head-money! Is that it? Well, set your mind at rest. I have thrown off the harness, and am now a simple miner. You are free to work your lines."

"Cause you heard I was comin' down to take a han' in the game, an' you knowed you'd git left in the race?"

"I heard that you had been sent for, and though I had some thoughts of trying my hand at the job, I gave over the idea, not through fear of your marvelous powers, but simply because I don't care to have my name connected in any manner with a piece of botch-work."

Nor' West Nick laughed disagreeably.

"That's a slick way to turn it off, but a heap harder to swallow than it would be ef you was to own up, flat-footed, that you was skeered o' gittin' left."

"Look here!" and Dan Brown arose from his seat, a red spot glowing in each cheek, though his voice, if possible, was more quiet and even than before.

"What do you want, anyhow? There is something which you are holding back. If you have any cause of quarrel with me—if you come here to crowd me into a row, say so. If you want fight, by the Lord of Israel! you shall have your fill!"

Nor' West Nick raised one hand, but it was with a placable gesture, not one of menace, and a broad smile spread over his rugged features.

"That's one bet won, anyhow! They said no man could git Dan Brown hot, an' live long enough to tell of it."

Despite himself, the Denver detective could not keep from smiling, but this lasted only a moment. Then, coldly:

"Have you anything more to say? If so, and you are wise, you will come to the point at once."

"Jest this," and as he spoke, Nor' West Nick lugged a heavy canvas bag out from the bosom of his shirt, giving it a shake which was answered by the musical clink of gold. "In that weasel-skin air jest fifty yaller-boys—double X's, each one. I want to make you a bet of the hull boodle!"

"On what point?"

"On the pint of our noses!" grinned Nor' West Nick, but taking a swift step backward and laughingly raising his hands as the hot light leaped up in the detective's eyes at the low laugh which ran around the room. "Tain't a joke, pard, ef it ~~do~~ sound somethin' like it. I'm bettin' that I've got a better nose than you hev—a sharper nose fer a blind scent. In other tarms, I'm open to bet ye this thousan' in good kyme that I kin lay clean over you as a detective. Is that plain enough fer your understandin'?"

"As far as it goes, yes," responded Dan Brown, his wonted coolness restored. "You propose a test of some sort. What?"

"One thousan' dollars, even up, that I kin ferret out an' break up the gang led by the p'izen critter as calls hisself Cap'n Slyboots, that I kin run the head imp into camp afore you do, both startin' even in the race, to-morrer, or the minnit you say you'll take the bet."

An eager buzzing of voices sounded through the room at this cool proposition. Hardly one present but what was in one way or another interested in the matter. For the past year, Captain Slyboots and his band of Anti Monopolists—self-chosen titles—had been exceedingly industrious in and around Rocky Bar, now holding up a coach, now raiding the choicest herd that came handy, or making a swift descent upon the quartz mills on cleaning up day. Thus far, almost uniform success had rewarded his enterprise, and every effort to combine against him had fallen through, some hinted because he had too many secret friends in town, even if the masked riders themselves were not citizens when off duty.

Little wonder, then, that the spectators crowded eagerly around the two men and breathlessly listened for the answer of the Denver detective. It was not long delayed.

"That is a good bet, even if I lose it," coolly admitted Dan Brown, turning to the table and counting out the amount named. "Captain Slyboots is liable to cost me that sum, and more, almost any day that the Jealous Girl remains in my possession. Set your stakeholder, sir. Any responsible man will do."

"I'll take the boss," with a nod toward St. Clair Guthrie, who was listening quietly to the discussion.

"He as well as another," returned Dan Brown, pushing his money across the table. "New one

word to you, sir. You have doubled your work, by speaking so openly, here. I would be willing to wager double the amount that one or more of the gang is now in this room—if not the head rascal himself!"

"Which is jest what I figgered on. A easy job ain't what I'm after, this whack, but one that'll test the stuff that's in you as well as me. I claim that I'm the boss bloodhoun' of all Amer'ky, when it comes to runnin' a blind trail. You think the same, no matter ef you don't come out flat-footed an' say so. I made up my mind to find out which one is right. This is the way I tuck to git at it. See?"

An abrupt change came over the Denver detective. His blue eyes glittered like those of an angry serpent. The red spots came back into his cheeks. There was an ominous ring to his voice as he faced the bragging detective, slowly shaking one forefinger in his face.

"You have gained the end you were seeking. You have bantered me into making a bet with you, and in doing so, I have shown more patience than you have any right to expect. Now one word of warning—and you may consider it sworn to:

"Go your own way to work to win your bet, but bother me no more, or, by the Lord of Israel! I'll make you think you have been drawn through a thrashing-machine!"

Nor' West Nick started back, his eyes wide open.

"You ain't talkin' to me like that?" he stammered.

"To you—Nor' West Nick and none other!" cried Dan Brown, but ere he could say more, or the western detective make reply, a deep voice was heard, uttering the words:

"Talk o' angels, an' you'll hear thar wings rustle! Who's takin' my name in vain? Who said Nor' West Nick?"

A mutter of surprise ran through the gathering.

CHAPTER V.

ANOTHER RICHMOND IN THE FIELD.

ALL eyes were turned wonderingly toward the front of the long apartment, from whence these words proceeded. There they paused, for just within the door stood the man who had spoken—the new claimant of the title Nor' West Nick and all the honors thereunto pertaining.

In quantity, whatever the quality, there was rather more than enough of the new-comer to make another gangling giant like him who stared in open-mouthed astonishment and disgust upon this unexpected rival; enough had it been rolled and drawn out lengthways, but as it was, the two men were no more alike than a fence-post and a beer-barrel.

With arms akimbo, one hand holding his hat, leaving his head bare, his short, sturdy legs braced widely apart, the fellow bore slight resemblance to the angel with which he had compared himself.

The top of his skull was perfectly bald, showing a curiously flat and level surface, which was still further augmented by the dense mat of fiery red hair with which the barren space was encircled. A thick growth of the same brilliant hue covered all of his face save the nose and forehead. Though so immensely thick and luxuriant in its growth, both hair and beard were cropped until but little more than an inch in length, standing straight on end like the fur of a sun-basking beaver. In startling contrast were his mustaches. Red as though fresh from a bath in cochineal dye, growing rankly and immensely long, though betraying evidence of training and careful keeping wholly at variance with the rest of his person, they drooped to his shoulders, then curved outward and upward, giving a ferocious look to a face that would otherwise have been comical, if not ridiculous.

Little, pig-shaped eyes of light blue twinkled amid the bristles which so thickly covered the fat cheeks. The round tip of a small nose which could be distinguished more easily by its darker red than from its size. These were the only features at all distinguishable amid that chaparral of stubby beard.

Immensely broad shoulders, a huge, swelling chest, a truly Falstaffian middle, tightly girthed by a broad leather belt to which were suspended a long knife and brace of heavy revolvers, short, elephant-like legs, terminating in feet so long, so broad, so flat, that, taking them in connection with the curiously flattened skull, the observer was forcibly impressed with the idea that the odd-looking fellow had once been a giant in height, but by some malicious fate had been "telescoped" into his present shape.

A red flannel shirt, torn, greasy and sweat-stained; a pair of what had once been white duck trousers in the long ago, but which were now even more dirty than the upper garment, patched at seat and both knees with the lettered side of a flour sack, ragged at the bottoms, where they lay in folds over an immense pair of bull-hide shoe-packs.

Such was the outward man upon whom all eyes were turned. What lay beneath the surface, time alone could reveal.

"Who said Nor' West Nick? Who dar'd to take the name o' the high-muck-a-muck o' the howlin' wilderness in vain? Show me the oudacious critter which buistered his clapper by shoutin' forth my name without addin' in musical accents the only nanny-goat—p'izen!"

Out puffed the fat cheeks until the fiery tip of his nose was completely lost to view, and the pig-eyes were as twin pencil-dots in a mass of red paint. Up and down worked the ends of the huge mustaches, like the horns of an angry Asiatic buffalo, while the immense splay feet slowly slid toward each other, apparently of their own volition.

A peculiar smile crept over the handsome countenance of the Denver detective as he glanced swiftly from one to the other of the odd-looking customers who both laid claim to the title of the noted border detective. Had he penetrated the mystery—for mystery there certainly must be?

"Tongue-tied, ain't ye?" persisted the fat Hercules, clapping his hat on and throwing his head far back in order to peer out from beneath the drooping brim, while his stumpy thumbs were stuck under his armpits, in ludicrous imitation of the attitude first assumed by his rival. "Mebbe you cain't understand good American talk, so I'll say it ag'in an' say it ~~slow~~! The two-legged critter as howls out my name, 'thout sayin' 'p'izen, is a hoss-thief, a baby-slapper an' a woman-kicker from the word git-up."

Dan Brown quickly stepped forward a few feet.

then paused with a genial smile upon his lips as he spoke:

"My dear sir, I uttered the words at which you appear to take offense, but I had no idea of stepping on your corns in doing so. Before I apologize, will you be so kind and condescending as to tell me who you are, and what your name is?"

"Nor' West Nick, jest down from the frozen mountains."

"The durned, lyin' bun'le o' fat an' dirt!" gasped the original claimant of the title in dispute, his long neck craned forward, his eyes almost popping out of their sockets.

Still further back leaned the fiery head as the little pig-eyes fixed themselves upon the indignant speaker.

"Nuther cabbage-head bu'sted! What sort o' music is that fly-up-the-crick tryin' to give us?"

To one side stepped Brown, a bland smile upon his face, honey distilling from his tongue as he bowed low with a gentle wave of his white hands:

"Nor' West Nick Number Two, allow me to introduce Nor' West Nick Number One! Gentlemen, be pleased to know each other. May your friendship be thicker than the one," with a bow to the newcomer, "and last longer than the other," repeating the salutation, but directing it to the giant. "Brothers," he added, turning to the laughing spectators, joining the tips of his outspread fingers as they hung drooping before his chest, his blue eyes uprolling, his voice sounding through his nose with the genuine, old-time camp-meeting twang "while the straying sheep and the wandering ram embrace each other and explain how loving twins became so widely separated, let us unite in singing that good old song, 'How happy could I be with either, Were t'other dear charmer away!' Sing, brothers, sing!"

"Durned ef I don't begin to b'lieve I've run chuck-up into a lunatic 'sylum!" gasped Nor' West Nick, Number Two, dashing the drooping brim of the battered hat out of his eyes and retreating a step or two. "Good-evenin', gents! See you some other time when the moon ain't so full—"

"No ye don't, consarn ye!" grated the gangling giant, plunging forward and making a grasp at the retreating form of his rival. "Ye don't pull out o' this ontel ye take back them words an' own up to bein' a double-an'-twisted liar."

With a swift motion of his sturdy right arm, the red-headed claimant brushed aside the hand that sought to close upon his shoulder, then, squarely planted before his rival, his whole person the very picture of pugnacity, he growled:

"Clean crazy you be, 'tanyrate—that's plain as the ugly nose on your uglier mug; but, crazy or no crazy, you don't want to muss up my twilight with your ongentle grip, unless your will is made, an' your place in the lightnin' 'spress over the range is spoken fer—now you hear me shout! An' when Nor' West Nick speaks, he says somethin'—bet yer life!"

"Waal, I ber-durned!" gasped the gangling giant, falling back a pace as though thoroughly amazed, staring at the defiant speaker with wildly-protruding eyes.

"I reckon you will, ef you live long enough. Heap better men than you hev bin durned an' double durned on top o' that. Take a gent's advice: go home an' put your head to soak. Don't 'spose yourself while the moon is full. Try an' fergit that you ever putt on ther name of a gentleman instid o' your own, an' thar's some hopes o' your rektiverin'."

Change after change swept over the face of the tall claimant while the fat man was speaking in such a patronizing tone, ending in a ghastly grin as that worthy concluded.

"Ef you ain't a cool 'un, chaw me up fer a dried apple!"

"I was raised on a iceberg, hed snow fer a blanket, an' was weaned on hail-stones!" grinned the fat man.

"That goes without sayin', or you couldn't come in hyar an' try to pass yourself off for a white man. You Nor' West Nick!" and the fellow went off into a roar of laughter. "Ef that ain't the beatin'est joke I ever run across, then I wouldn't say so! You Nor' West Nick—then who in thunder air I?"

"A long-geared jass-ack, wrapped up in a lion's skin, jest green enough to think he kin fool gentlemen," was the swift retort. "But it won't wor. You fergot to trim down them sky-scrapin' ears—"

"Come, gentlemen," said Dan Brown, interposing quickly. "Don't grow excited, and get to pulling hair before this interesting question of identity is fairly settled. I speak in behalf of the company in general—and I think I am expressing their earnest sentiments when I say that one and all are deeply interested in finding out the bottom facts of this mystery," with a bland glance around the room.

A general murmur of approval answered him, while one more blunt digger cried out:

"Mighty right you air, boss! We want to know which is which, an' ef they can't settle the question atween 'em, why we'll jest peel the hide off o' both, an' see what lays underneath—ef we don't, I'm a nigger!"

Dan Brown bowed gratefully to the speaker, then turned once more to the rival claimants, who were savagely scowling at each other in a way that boded trouble ere long.

"You have heard the verdict, gentlemen. That there is a genuine Nor' West Nick we all are perfectly well aware, but it can hardly be that he was born double, though I must say you look enough alike to be twins."

"What is it to you, anyhow?" growled the fat man.

"Just this: as Nor' West Nick this gentleman forced me into a little wager. If he is what he claims, all right. If not—if he is the fraud, for fraud one of you twain most assuredly is—I want to find out why he assumed that name."

"Putt the tip o' your finger on that fat cuss, an' you'll smell the fraud clean up to your shoulder!" snorted the giant, with a withering glance at his rival.

"That's a morgidge on one ear!" grinned the fat fellow. "It's overdue, an' I'll foreclose the minnit this gent is ready to step aside an' let muskle decide the 'spute."

"Soap-grease 'll be a drug on the markit in less'n two minnits after ye try it on!" retorted the other.

"Slow an' easy, gentlemen," interposed the

Denver detective. "Have patience for a few moments, for then you can wade knee deep in each other's gore, if your tastes run in that direction. Just now I am running this circus."

"You first, my dear sir," nodding to the tall claimant. "You were hardly christened Nor' West Nick. Possibly by giving us your real name we can get at the bottom truth."

"Puttin' on a powerful sight o' frills, ain't ye?" growled the fellow. "Ef this here is a kittykasm class—"

"It is just that," was the sharp reply. "Answer me, unless you prefer to own up that you are an impostor."

"Poster?" grated the giant, his black eyes flashing wickedly as he showed his teeth; but with an abrupt change of demeanor, he added: "Let that go ontel this matter is settled, then we'll hev a little talk-it-over. My name is Dave Nichols—Nick fer short, an' Nor' West added 'cause I made my first big break after sinners 'way up in them regions."

"Very neatly explained," said Dan Brown, with a mocking smile; then turning to the fat man: "And your name is—"

"Norton Weston Nickerson!" glibly rattled off the fat claimant. "Chop off the three tails, an' thar ye hev it—Nor' West Nick, which is three times better then that cuss kin go."

With an air of perplexity, Dan Brown stood glancing from one claimant to the other. To all appearance he was at his wit's end to fathom the mystery.

"Thar's only one way to settle it," growled the giant. "Talk won't do it, but these tools will!" and he clapped a hand upon one of the revolvers at his waist; a motion which was promptly duplicated by the other disputant.

"Hold!" rung out a sharp, stern voice, and St. Clair Guthrie rose from the chair in which he had until now remained seated, before the faro-table, with a cocked revolver clasped in his shapely white hand. "This has gone far enough. If you think to carry on this foolish squabble all night, in my place, you miss your guess. One word more, and something will drop—too dead to kick!"

The leveled weapon covered the brain of the fat claimant, though the tall man was standing nearest the gambler. Was it only chance, or was there something more beneath the surface than the spectators had yet suspected?

"And that something will be St. Clair Guthrie!"

The voice was that of Dan Brown, and to back the threat, he held a revolver which covered the gambler.

Despite his nerve, which had passed into a proverb, St. Clair Guthrie turned a shade paler, and his weapon slowly drooped at the muzzle as he met that stern gaze.

"What do you mean?" he asked, slowly. "Have—n't I the right to control my own place of business?"

"Under ordinary circumstances, yes; not now. I'm interested in this little affair, and I mean to see it through to the end. Give me your word not to interfere, or—"

"Or what?" demanded the gambler, frowning.

"Or take a little walk with me outside, for a conversation over six-shooters," came the instant reply.

"I'll not have any fighting in this place," sullenly. "See that you don't begin it, then. This question has got to be settled, and if there's any shooting to be done, I'll do it!"

CHAPTER VI.

DAN BROWN AS RING-MASTER.

SHARP and stern rung the voice of the Denver detective as he confronted Rocky Bar's "boss card-flipper," keeping him covered by the weapon which was ready to sound a death-note at the slightest invitation, for there was an ugly glitter in the eyes of the sport which told plainly what he would do if chance favored him in the least.

"Your ears are good, St. Clair Guthrie. You heard what I said. I have no particular desire to cut you off in the bloom of your youth and prosperity, but that promise I must and will have! Can I speak plainer?" added Dan Brown, his voice strangely softened—but it was like the purring of a panther just previous to its death-leap.

A sickly smile contorted the white face of the gambler, for it was a terribly bitter pill for a man of his position and reputation to swallow, but he could see that his antagonist meant business of the purest sort, and with the best grace he could muster, he made the most of a bad bargain.

"If the majority of these gentlemen wish to have the ridiculous affair go on, so be it," he said, each word seeming to stick in his throat, and flushing hotly as he noted the sarcastic smile which played around the mustached lip of his cool adversary.

"As for your threats, Dan Brown, more of them hereafter. You have the drop on me now, but it may not always be thus. Then—look out for breakers!"

Slowly and distinctly came the last words, accompanied by a glare so deadly in its quality that those who caught it besides Dan Brown, felt sure that bloodshed would come of that unfortunate encounter ere the tale was told.

"Let us get this mixed-up affair straightened out, and then, my dear fellow, I am at your disposal, when, where, and in whatever manner you may elect. But now—your promise, please."

"Look to the crowd for your answer," was the sullen response as the gambler sunk back into his seat, cutting and shuffling the deck of cards which lay beside the silver faro-box. "Whatever they say, I'll indorse. If that don't suit you, make the best of it."

"If you can feel easier that way, all right," retorted Brown, with an easy laugh. "Gentlemen, your votes?"

"Make 'em show up in their real colors!"

"Shake 'em up in a bag together, and see which one comes out first—then brand him so there'll be no more dispute!"

"Make a ring an' let 'em fight it out fer the name!"

These were but a sample of the cries which answered the appeal of Dan Brown. Among the many there came not a sound which could be construed as in favor of St. Clair Guthrie, and that worthy, now pale as a ghost, but with all his usual coolness restored, outwardly, at least, glanced swiftly around the room as though marking the most enthusiastic for future remembrance.

"These gentlemen have spoken, Mr. Brown," he

said, with an icy smile that disclosed his white, even teeth beneath his waxed and pointed mustaches. "You and the rest for the pot. My hand won't bear betting on, just now."

"Thanks," bowed the Denver detective. "I felt sure that you would alter your mind when you came to take a second thought. Be sure your courtesy is fully appreciated."

"Now, gentlemen, one and all! It is not my habit to crowd myself forward into the front rank, without having particular business right there. On this occasion I hold that I am justified in doing so, if only to learn whether I am betting against the simon-pure Nor' West Nick, or an audacious fraud who has assumed his name and reputation for some purpose best known to himself."

A sullen growl from the lips of the gangling giant.

"Patience, my dear sir," said Dan Brown, with that peculiar smile which spoke plainer than words to those who knew him best. "I do not say that you are a fraud, but as the days of miracles are past, and rumor saying nothing of two Nor' West Nicks, it stands to reason that one of you gentlemen is anything but a gentleman. And the impostor has got to be unmasked before either of you leave this room, if it takes all summer!"

"It's that chunk o' soap-grease—"

"It's that frost-bitten specimint of a 'angle-worm—"

In one breath the rival claimants spoke, as one man they broke off and glared ferociously at each other, while the highly-amused spectators smiled in audible chorus.

Nearly all present began to set the two claimants down as frauds of the first water, and compare them to two school-boys disputing over a trifle, breathing forth fire and vengeance, but with little stomach for a fight.

"There is only one way to settle the matter, as I see," gravely answered Dan Brown. "From common report, Nor' West Nick is a terror to common men in a fight. Let the impostor own up his falsity, or else the dispute must be decided by a duel!"

"That hits me right whar I live!" shouted the tall man, leaping into the air and cracking his heels together. "Jest let me git at him an' ef I don't peel off his hide quicker'n a volcaner kin scorch a feather, call me a—"

"The biggest liar that ever trod the footstool, an' you'll tell the truth!" cut in the fat claimant.

"Whoop-e-e-e! Trot out your double-barreled howitzers! Bring out your bottled cyclones an' hurricanes! Parade your blizzards—an' ef I don't make that drewled out link o' sp'it bologny think he's sent fer an' cain't git thar, I'll eat my shoe-packs fer mince-pie, haul down my colors an' own up he is a white man—which 'd be committing susanside, fer a lie only hafe as big'd split the gullet of a rubber-lined volcaner!"

The less nimble-tongued giant fairly howled with fury as he stamped his feet in rapid rotation, grating his teeth until his shaggy beard was flecked with froth.

"Nough o' this durn foolishin'!" he howled. "Let me git at the dirty mop-rag, wring him dry an' scatter him over the hull kentry fer bait to p'izen wolves an' buzzards! Which is it, knives or pistols? Quick!"

"Cool and easy, my long-geared friend!" warned Dan Brown, laughing. "I am acting as ring-master of this little circus, and I mean to see that each one of you has a fair shake, if only to get at the truth. You're too excited. You'd cut your fingers, or blow out your own brains, if I were to turn you loose now."

"Yas, simmer down, lengthy!" chuckled the fat claimant. "You'll find heap-plenty hotness whar I'm goin' to send ye, 'thout b'lin' over aforehand. Say, boss," turning to Dan Brown, with a coaxing grin, "jest let me give him a punch on his safety-valve while we're waitin', fer fear he'll bust his b'iler an' daub up our Sunday-go-to-meetin's!"

A general laugh greeted this whimsical speech, and it was easy to see that the fat claimant was rapidly gaining the good wishes of the crowd in this strange dispute.

"Curb your impatience, my dear sir," blandly ordered the self-elected master of ceremonies. "This is too grave and serious a matter for idle jesting. You may think different, may look upon it as a good joke, to be laughed at and forgotten the next minute, but not so. You two men have got to fight until one gives in, is killed, or owns up that he has taken the name of the genuine Nor' West Nick in vain. And then, the victor, or survivor, as the case may be, has got to answer for all the trouble he has put me to."

The fat claimant glanced toward his rival, then back to the speaker, dubiously scratching his head.

"As a favor, boss, say that ag'in, an' please say it slow."

"With pleasure," even more blandly than before. "I mean to find out which of you two is the original Jacobs, and then thrash him clean out of his boots—or shoe-packs!"

"Sure that's all?" grinned the other. "Sart'in you hain't fergot somethin'? When you was a kid an' went to school, didn't you ever git thumped 'cause you couldn't spell a-b-u-l, bull, able? Ef not, your education has bin sadly neglected, an' when I come out top o' the heap, an' you try to write that mighty big little word on my corporosity, you're goin' to come out a heap wiser man then you went in—bet your life!"

Brown laughed shortly at the fellow's impudence. "I shall be delighted to take a lesson in spelling from such an accomplished teacher, and if for that reason alone, you have my best wishes for backing in the coming ordeal."

"It's comin' durned slow then!" growled the giant. "Hurry this thing up, afore I git mad an' turn myself loose, or you'll hear somethin' drap—an' won't hev to look fur to find the thing, nyther!"

"You shall have your will, my dear sir. Gentlemen, please form a ring of the regulation size, and let the inner circle join hands and stand fast—"

His further words were drowned by the chorus of laughing cheers which broke from the fun-loving crowd. From the serious manner in which the Denver detective had spoken of and treated the matter thus far, they had expected the dispute to be settled by an appeal to deadly weapons, and though at all times willing enough to witness a duel "for blood," they saw still more amusement in a regular fist-fight between two such oddly-matched antagonists.

Those who were watching the rival claimants most closely when Dan Brown uttered his decision saw, or fancied they saw, momentary gleams of satisfaction in their eyes, as though that speech gave them no little relief. Yet this could hardly be, for a simultaneous howl broke from the two men.

"Good Lawd! how much funder is this durned foolishness goin' to last?" growled the giant.

"Punchin' an' ha'r-pullin', when my throat is so thirsty fer be-lud that I kin feel the cracks openin' clean down to my shoe-packs? Boss, can't you shove it at us a little tougher? Can't you chuck in a pistil or two, or a pen-knife, at least, jest to make it a trifle more bindin'?"

Dan Brown drew a revolver and cocked it.

"Gentlemen, as I had the honor to remark before, I am acting as ring-master of this little circus. You are the clowns, for this occasion only. This is my whip, and when it cracks it means business. I'm not over-anxious to use it, but—you will greatly oblige me by stepping inside that ring!"

Pleasant and affable as were his tones, the dullest-witted man in that room had no difficulty in seeing that the Denver detective meant business, pure and simple. Whatever else they might have been, neither of the two claimants were fools, and without another word they entered the ring which had been formed by the laughing, jolting crowd, as nearly as might be of the regulation size decreed by the time-honored "P. R."—four-and-twenty feet square.

Dan Brown took his position, pistol in hand, just within the ring, where his front was toward the table at which St. Clair Guthrie still sat, shuffling his cards. If done by design, the detective gave no outward evidence of suspicion.

"You will remove your belt-of-arms, gentlemen," said the "ring-master," quietly. "Not that I believe either of you would try to take any unfair advantage of the other, but because they might interfere with your freedom of movement. Give them in charge of whomever you prefer, and I'll guarantee their safe keeping and return when the survivor calls for them. Good! Now strip if you like. In five minutes I will call time."

"Tain't cause I need to take 'em off," said the fat claimant, with a grave shake of his head as he stripped off his ragged shirt, holding it up and viewing the air-holes. "I could climb up that limber telegraph pole an' foreclose my morgidge on that left ear without fizin' a ha'r, but I don't want to run the risk o' soilin' my Sunday-go-to-meetin's. Ef harm should come to them, I couldn't go to see my chunk o' sweetness wropped up in caliker, until my New York tailor sent me another suit. Han'le it easy, pard!" and he tossed the ragged odoriferous garment upon the shoulder of a well-dressed, finical-looking sport, greatly to that worthy's disgust and the mirth of the appreciative crowd.

The giant had less to say, but was even more thorough and rapid in his preparations, eying the immensely muscular development of his antagonist, now that he was stripped. What had before seemed unwieldy fat now proved to be in the main solid fat and muscle, and a look of concern came into the eyes of the giant, chasing away the look of confidence which had at first filled them. The victory did not look so promising now as at first, and he scowled savagely as he heard the fast-flying offers of odds upon the fat claimant.

"Time is up!" cried Dan Brown, closing his watch and restoring it to his pocket. "But one word before you open the ball. Our object is to get at the truth, in the shortest possible time, and on that account we will dispense with the rules governing a regular prize-fight. Rough-and-tumble will bring out the truth the quickest, so pitch in, gentlemen!"

The giant uttered a savage growl, for he felt that this decision was a blow aimed against his interest. Once within the grasp of those enormous arms, and science could avail but little against brute strength.

On the contrary, the fat claimant seemed hugely pleased, and there was a broad grin on his face that completely eclipsed his pug nose, as he danced clumsily before his antagonist, working his huge arms up and down as though trying to climb a rope.

"Come an' see me, you up-ended angle-worm! Yar's your master, an' yar's your mist'ess—ugh!"

A tremendous grunt burst from him as the giant shot out one long leg and planted his foot heavily against the stomach of his rival, then lunged forward with both hands in swift succession as the head of his rival came forward as the result of that wind-damaging kick. Deftly the double stroke was delivered, cutting the flesh and bringing the blood from the puffy cheeks, and as the giant, with an ugly laugh, leaped back to avoid the savage return, his stock rose in the market, and several calls at evens were heard.

"Somebody lend me the money, an' I'll take all sech fool bets as them!" shouted the fat man. "Ten to one that he can't do it ag'in—fifty to one in thousands that I break him plum in two at the fust lick—only let me hit him once!"

But that was the puzzle. Active as a cat, despite his ungainly build, the tall claimant dodged here and there, nimbly avoiding the bull-like rushes of his antagonist, "propping" him heavily whenever he saw a favorable opening, his bony knuckles leaving their impress every time, until the red face and beard of the fat man were dyed still redder. But that was the only result. The blows, heavy and well delivered though they were, only served to render the man more dangerous, and slowly the confident light faded from the eyes of the giant. His rapid movements were beginning to affect his wind, while his adversary seemed quite as fresh as at the outset.

Knowing that he was no match for the giant in science, the fat claimant devoted all his energies to coming to close quarters, confident in his enormous strength, and he kept this end doggedly in view, despite the address with which his intention was foiled, time and again, by the superior agility of the other.

At length his chance came. In evading a rush, the tall fellow dodged into one corner of the "squared circle," and seeing his chance, the fat Hercules plunged forward, both arms outspread to grasp his antagonist should he try to dodge past as before, though he knew that he was thus laying himself open to severe punishment.

Desperately the giant sought to beat him off, plying his bony fists with all the power he could sum-

mon upon the gashed and blood-dripping countenance, and for a few moments it seemed as though he would succeed, for he checked the bull-like rush, his blows sounding like the thud of a log against an embankment of sand.

Not two men out of a thousand could have stood up against that terrific thumping, and as often as he tried to move forward he was knocked back, only to lurch forward again with the same result.

To less excited men than the spectators it would have seemed a sickening and disgustingly brutal scene, but their blood was also at fever heat, and they wildly cheered now one, now another of the combatants, as the tide of fortune seemed about to turn in favor of the one or the other.

Such desperate work could not last long, and the ring swayed back to give more room as the short man plunged blindly forward despite the hailing storm of blows.

"Now I've got ye!" he howled, and so he had, but in a very different shape from that which he intended!

Seeing that he must close, the tall man stooped and evading the blind grip of his foe, grasped his feet and with a tremendous effort, threw him over backward, then, his long hair caught by the falling champion, he dropped upon the other.

With the breath knocked fairly out of his carcass by the heavy fall and added weight of his antagonist, the fat man found his arms pinned to the floor by the knees of the giant, whose right hand was raised above his face, the left clutching his throat, as he grated:

"Own up that you're a dirty liar! Give in that I'm the one an' only Nor' West Nick, or take your gruel!"

"Own up nothin'!"

Down came the heavy fist, effectually cutting short the defiant growl. A savage grunt from the fat man—then a furious struggle for the mastery.

Just how it was done, not one of the excited spectators could have explained, but all at once the huge legs and immense shoe-packs belonging to the fat man twinkled in the air, and the giant was tossed end over end, falling flat upon his stomach, while the man-mountain sat straddle of his back.

"Oh, you needn't kick an' try to scramble, my purty little pile-driver!" chuckled the fat man, panting heavily from his tremendous exertions, but with a broad grin upon his bloody countenance. "You hed your fun, usin' me fer a choppin'-block long enough, an' now it's my turn! Say your pra's, ye ongodly heathen, an' don't fergit to ax forgiveness fer takin' the good name of a white gentleman in vain! Spit it out, 'fore the crack o' doom falls on top o' your sinful head an' bu'sts it wide open! 'Fess that you're a dirty liar, an' that I'm the 'riginal Nor' West Nick, or take your gruel red hot!"

Back and up was dragged the giant's head by the hair. Aloft rose that mighty fist, but it did not descend after the fashion intended by its owner, for just at that moment a startling interruption came to completely change the situation.

CHAPTER VII.

ONE MYSTERY ON ANOTHER'S HEELS.

WHOLLY absorbed by the desperate struggle which was being enacted before them, now seemingly near its end, not one of the many forming that breathless ring heard aught of the short but wild tumult which arose directly in front of Aladdin's Cave.

Pressed hard by those reckless centaurs of the desert, stung at every leap by those terrible whips, goaded on to renewed speed whenever it gave signs of failing, the once black bull with its strange rider, plunged straight down the one broad street which Rocky Bar could boast. Straight on, blood trickling from a hundred wounds, dropping from its wildly-dilated nostrils, blind with its frightful exertions, on rushed the mad Texan.

It had already suffered the tortures of a score of deaths during that long, night-mare race, and its powers of endurance were rapidly ebbing, when out from the lurking shadows leaped a dingy-white form, heralding its coming with that peculiar blood-curdling *gurr-r-r* which is the attribute of only one creature—the bull-dog.

A wild bellow of mingled rage and pain escaped the mad Texan as those massive, undershot jaws closed like the grip of death on its nose. Desperately it shook its head, tried to use its horns, to bring its sharp hoofs into play, but though the ugly pet of the doggy portion of Rocky Bar's sporting population was lifted from its feet and swung to and fro like some fantastic pendulum, that was all. Death alone could break its savage grip.

One more smothered bellow—now of utter panic and the bull plunged blindly on, striking against the half glass doors of Aladdin's Cave, shattering that frail barrier and stumbling across the threshold, falling headlong in the very midst of the ring where the fat claimant was about to assert his right to wear the title of Nor' West Nick.

With yells and curses of fright the crowd scattered, some of them being hurled across the room by the blind plunge of the tortured animal. With a howl of terror the fat man rolled off of his antagonist, and has'ly scrambled away on all-fours, while the giant, seemingly paralyzed with horror, lay in a trembling heap at the very feet of the bull as the animal recovered its footing, snorting loudly with mingled fear and rage, no longer incumbered with the white bull-dog.

Beneath its feet lay the carcass, crushed and motionless, slain by the heavy fall of its victim.

Of all in the room, but one man seemed to retain his presence of mind, even in the slightest degree. He beheld that helpless form upon the bull's back, and with a cry of hot indignation, he flashed forth a knife and leaped forward.

One stroke, swift as lightning, and to the full as deadly, then the bull fell forward once more. Not even a quivering of its sinewy limbs. The surely-aimed weapon had severed the spinal cord at its junction with the skull, and death was instantaneous.

Snatching from its bloody sheath the weapon which had done such good service, Dan Brown slashed at the hide thongs which held the prairie Mazeppa, his wondrous strength and address saving the man from being crushed beneath the death-stricken animal as it rolled over upon its side.

Almost swifter than the eye could follow was all

this accomplished, and the Denver detective was still in ignorance whether it was a living or a dead man whom he had saved, when, with loud cries, three men rushed into the room.

"Don't let the critter git away—hang fast to the p'izen cuss!" shouted the foremost man, abruptly pausing as he beheld the strange tableau.

Supported by the left arm and shoulder of Dan Brown, hung the limp, almost paralyzed figure of the released captive, alive, but for the moment helpless. Yet there came into his blood-shot eyes a look of deadly hatred as the voice of Dick Wheeler smote upon his ears, and with an effort his head was turned until he could glare into the face of the man who had subjected him to a shameful torture more agonizing than a thousand ordinary deaths.

"To — with the hand that set him free!" grated the Maverick-hunter, jerking forth a revolver which exploded the instant it came to a level.

Whether the shot was directed at Dan Brown, or at the helpless being whom he had just rescued, no one save the cowboy could tell, but the lead never found its intended victim.

Swift as thought, the Denver detective stooped and lowered his burden to the ground, this totally unexpected action suffering the bullet to whistle harmlessly above their heads. As swiftly he arose, both hands armed, and as a second fierce oath grated through the cowboy's clinched teeth, his right arm swung forward and a jet of flame-tinged smoke leaped from the muzzle of his revolver.

Wheeler staggered back, dropping his pistol and clapping his hand to his face, on which the lamp-light showed stains of blood. The crowd scattered in mad haste, stumbling and falling over each other, for right well they knew that bullets set free in a meeting like this, are no respecters of persons—that innocent beings are quite as likely to suffer as those more immediately concerned in the fracas.

Long-legs and Ricketty Joe, believing their mate and acknowledged leader had received his death-wound at the hands of the Denver detective, jerked forth their pistols, despite the warning cry which Brown gave them.

"I'm running this circus! Pull a weapon and you'll hurt— Hal if that's your game—"

Sharply he spoke, but still more sharply rung forth his pistols, one shot from each, almost simultaneously, yet the result of those snap-shots proved plain enough that Brown had taken all the time necessary for certain aim.

Cries of angry wonder broke from the two cowboys as they felt their pistols knocked to one side and almost torn from their hands before they could raise the hammers, but they partially divined the truth as they felt the stinging of the particles of lead which entered the flesh of their hands—the unerring aim of the lightning sport had been directed at their weapons, not their persons.

"Hold!" rung out the sharp, stern voice, as the ready pistols covered them fairly. "Hold! unless you want a free passage over the range! I have you down fine—I could riddle you all with lead, if I chose, before you could change those harmless tools for others—but I don't care to have your blood on my hands, even though you tried to take mine, just now."

Even as they shrunk back from that cool front, the cowboys were mechanically trying to cock their weapons, but in vain their attempts, and a mocking laugh broke from the Denver detective as he watched them.

"That won't work, gentlemen. If you take the trouble to look, you'll find Dan Brown's patent safety-lock on each one. Dig out the plug of lead, and you'll be all right again."

Incredible as it may seem, it was nevertheless a fact that the sharpshooter had temporarily disabled each of the three revolvers by striking the exposed portion of their cylinders with his bullets, jamming the lead between the barrel and half-open chamber in such a manner that it was impossible to revolve the cylinder until the imbedded lead had been dug away. Tiny splinters of the bullet had struck Dick Wheeler in the face, blinding him for the moment, but he quickly recovered and made a movement toward the second pistol which still hung at his waist.

"Touch that barker, my dear sir, before I give you leave, and you'll hear something drop, *heavy!*" cried Dan Brown, in a tone that could not be mistaken, emphasized as it was by leveled revolver.

"Who the dence 're you, to stan' up fer a cussed hoss-thief an' cattle-stealer like him?" growled the Maverick-hunter, yet visibly shrinking from before the muzzle.

"You're a liar if you couple my name with those foul epithets!" cried Jack Robinson, rising to his feet with difficulty, his blue eyes all aglow, only lacking the strength to leap upon and strike his enemy to the earth.

"Cool and easy, gentlemen!" cried Dan Brown. "Let's go to work at this matter right end foremost. Either this man is a frightful criminal, or else he has suffered terrible wrong in being treated as we saw, just now."

An angry laugh broke from the lips of the Maverick-hunter as he wiped the blood from his face, then pointed at the unsteady form behind the Denver detective.

"Look at the critter! He calls me a liar when I say he is a hoss-thief an' a cattle-stealer! Now I say more—that in yender dirty cuss you see the p'izen critter as calls hisself Cap'n Slyboots—"

An excited chorus from the crowd drowned the words he may have added, and there was a hasty movement as though to close in upon the man thus denounced, but Dan Brown, with revolver cocked and half raised, motioned them back.

"Steady, gentlemen, if you please! One book don't make the Bible, even though every word it contains may be gospel truth. There's always two sides to a question, and we have only heard one of them," and he turned toward the released captive. "You heard the charge brought by this gentleman? What have you to say in regard to it?"

Brief as the delay had been, for all that is recorded here transpired with wonderful rapidity, and utter as had been his exhaustion, the stranger had recuperated in a manner remarkable indeed, when all that he had undergone is considered. And now, still pale, his eyes sunken, his face haggard, his voice husky and unnatural, he stood erect and faced his accuser.

"Just this. That fellow is a liar. Every word

he has uttered is a lie, black and foul as his own heart! I am not Captain Slyboots. My name is Nor' West Nick."

Had a thunderbolt crashed down through the roof of Aladdin's Cave and fallen in their very midst, the assembled crowd could not have been more thoroughly amazed than they were by this concluding assertion. Yet another Nor' West Nick? Truly, as one of the bewildered miners muttered to his mate, the "woods must be full of 'em!"

From this new claimant to the other twain, all eyes turned as a matter of course.

The charge of the mad bull had separated the combatants, though they only escaped being crushed by the falling animal through wonderfully active movements, and each having gotten quite enough of the other, for the time being, they contented themselves with nursing their bruises while watching the sudden change of scene and actors. No less amazed were they when the released Mazeppa announced his claim to the title in defending their particular right to which they had so freely shed their blood, and a simultaneous howl of indignation burst from their lips as they rushed forward and confronted the man, with clinched fists and angry tongues.

"Smell of your master—smell of your mist'ess!" yelled the fat claimant, working his huge leg-of-mutton fists under the stranger's face. "Steal my name, will ye—"

"I've licked one man fer claimin' my name, an' I kin lick another fer the same thing!" declared the giant, spitting on his hands and also making hostile demonstrations. "Take it back, or git ready fer your gruel—"

For one instant Jack Robinson—or Nor' West Nick, as he now declared himself, stared at the wildly gyrating fists, then into the faces of the two men. As though he saw something there which angered him still more than their threatening words, a sharp cry broke from his lips, and, swift as thought, his clinched fist shot out—once, twice—and in different directions, but with the same degree of celerity, the two claimants lifted their feet from the floor and saluted the hard planks with the back of their heads.

His powers restored as though by magic, the athlete gave the fallen men no second look, but strode forward and confronted the cowboys, his face white as death, his blue eyes filled with a light that seemed to scorch, so intense was it.

"You cowardly devils!" he hissed, his voice strained and full of the most intense hatred. "You were three to one, yet you had to strike me from behind, and under cover of a pretended friendship. You have treated me worse than any white man would treat a sheep-killing cur, but you failed to kill me, and now—curse you! I'll tear you limb from limb, and break every bone in your vile carcasses—"

His swift speech ended in a snarl as savage and deadly as the growl of a famished panther, and, crouching, he was on the point of leaping upon the Maverick-hunters, when a firm hand closed upon his shoulder.

With an angry cry he wheeled and struck at the man who checked him, but Dan Brown ducked his head and evaded the stroke, closing with the infuriated man. For a minute the struggle was fierce in its intensity, but then the over-taxed muscles of Nor' West Nick gave way before his adversary, and, resigning the hopeless attempt, a bitter laugh parted his lips.

"Three—five—how many more enemies am I to meet? Finish your work, and do it up clean, or some of you will regret it!" he added, with a smothered curse of defiance.

"Whether we take you at your word or not depends upon the evidence you can bring forward to prove your claim to the title of Nor' West Nick, for if you are that man, you certainly cannot be Captain Slyboots, too," said the Denver detective, quietly, as he released the other. "I am not your enemy, unless these gentlemen can prove their charges true."

"And that I defy them to do," was the swift response, as, with an evident effort, the speaker regained a portion of his natural coolness. "Their charge is only a blind to excuse their devilry."

"But why should they act thus? What cause have you given them for thus misusing you?" persisted the detective.

"Ain't it enough that he run off our hosses an' cattle, not two weeks ago?" demanded Dick Wheeler.

"Can you prove that this man did so?"

"I kin swar to it, an' so kin my two mates; ax 'em!"

"They and you, too, would swear to a lie then! Two weeks ago I was in Denver, and this I can prove by these papers."

"Course you'd try to lie your neck out of a noose."

"That is one more count laid up against you, dog!" said Nor' West Nick, showing his teeth. "Keep on and I'll have to torture you as you did me, to anything like get even!"

As he spoke, he thrust one hand into a pocket and drew forth a small, pearl-handled pen knife, which he opened and used to cut the stitches of a small pocket in the breast of his coat, so cunningly hidden that none would think of searching there, unless in the secret.

"I think I can settle all doubts as to my identity, and though I would scorn to condescend so far were only these vile scoundrels concerned, to you, sir, as a gentleman, I am willing to show these papers."

Dan Brown took the documents, small and written on tissue-paper, which were handed to him, and running his eyes over the contents, a little exclamation escaped his lips.

"My dear sir," he said, extending his hand, which the other took, though coldly. "I am delighted to make your acquaintance, though I could wish it had been under happier circumstances; but for that we will try to make amends."

"Then you are satisfied?" asked the prairie Mazeppa.

"Perfectly. Gentlemen," he added, speaking for the benefit of the crowd. "Twice this evening we have been imposed upon by fellows who claimed to be the famous detective, Nor' West Nick. What their reasons for thus acting, you are as well able to guess as I; but let that point rest for the present. I hold here a signed and sealed commission as de-

tective, on special service, made out in the name of—"

"Let the name pass," quickly interposed the other.

"In the name of Nor' West Nick. I am satisfied that he is the original Jacobs, at last, and hope most sincerely that he will call these two audacious rascals to account for having taken his name in vain."

"I have more important business on hand, just now," said the detective, with an ugly smile that boded no good to those who had so frightfully maltreated him. "I swore to kill these three devils, and I mean to keep my word. Singly, or all at once, I'm not particular. I know that they can't kill me so quickly but that I can send them to eternal flames ahead of me! That rascal carries my pistols, stolen from me."

"Afore I give 'em up, one word to you, boss," said Wheeler, addressing Dan Brown. "We all know you. We know that you're white an' squar', clean through. Ef you say that we was mistook—that this feller cain't possibly be Cap'n Slyboots—then I'll take it on myself to give him all the satisfaction he kin git away with—an' mebbe more too!"

"I know the writing on that commission, and I know the man who wrote and signed it. It is dated just twelve days ago, at Denver; consequently your stock could not have been stolen by this gentleman," concisely responded Brown.

"Unless he knocked the real owner on the head an' tuck the dockment fer his own use," grinned the Maverick-hunter. "But, darn the odds! Ef he wants to fight, I'm his long-horn, when, whar an' how he darn pleases!"

"At once, and with revolvers. I'll take you one after the other, or all at the same time, just so there's no more delay!" sharply cried the detective.

"Outside, then," added Dan Brown. "I passed my word that there should be no powder-burning here, without I took a hand in it. The moon gives light enough for the most exacting."

The room was quickly cleared of all save St. Clair Guthrie, who still sat at his table, shuffling the cards, not once having arisen or betrayed the slightest curiosity during the exciting events which had transpired.

Where both men were so eager for the fray, few moments were needed to be cut to waste, and in five minutes from the time Dan Brown introduced the simon-pure Nor' West Nick, the duelists took their stations, at twenty paces from each other, each armed with two revolvers, which they were at liberty to use at will as soon as the word was given.

This was trembling on the lips of the Denver detective, when a wild scream broke upon the night air, and a tall, supple form rushed up to Nor' West Nick and clasped him about the neck, sobbing as she gasped:

"At last, Kyrle—my darling, forgive me—forgive!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE "CIRCUS" GROWS INTERESTING.

TRULY this was a night of surprises for the fun-loving sports of Rocky Bar, and not the least of the series was the one just then transpiring.

A young and lovely stranger—for this much the clear flood of moonlight which the silver luminary cast over the scene enabled one and all to distinguish—with half-bare arms flung around the neck of Nor' West Nick, with her bare head, crowned with its wealth of raven hair, now broken from its fastenings, drooping upon his breast. He with armed hand half raised to take the life of the man who had so terribly wronged him—with a deadly enemy standing just beyond—with the astounding crowd ranged in twin rows—all forming a tableau the like of which human eyes seldom rested upon.

But two men in all that assembly—unless Nor' West Nick made the third—recognized the woman, and these were Dan Brown and Arthur Ovelman, the New York speculator.

With a grating curse of mingled fury and hatred, the latter dashed through the crowd with a force that cast more than one aside, and snatched the fainting woman from her resting-place upon the bosom of the astounded sport.

"Ten thousand curses on your head, Kyrle Dando! What evil fate brought you across my path again?" he snarled, shaking his tightly-clinched fist in the face of the duelist.

A short, hard laugh broke from the detective—the first sound he had uttered since taking his position for the duel. With a curiously mingled look of contempt and surprise, he stared into the face of the old man for a moment, then turned toward Dan Brown, who was closely observing each phase of this extraordinary scene.

"Is this fellow crazy, or only drunk? By the Lord of Israel! I begin to believe that a whole lunatic asylum has broken loose, and I have run straight into the middle of it!"

"Say penitentiary, and you will be partly right, Kyrle Dando!" cried Arthur Ovelman, with a hard, bitter laugh. "Bah! you play your part well, but you dare not deny that you know me—more! that I know you, and what you are."

"If this drunken or crazy fellow has a friend or keeper in this crowd, take him away before he crowds me too far; I'm not in the humor for fooling, and he may get hurt."

A gasping sob from Marjean Ovelman at this moment announced her return to consciousness, and tearing herself from the arms of her parent, she fell at the feet of the detective, her hands clasped, her pale, tear-dampened face uplifted, heart-rending grief and pathos in her voice as she cried:

"Forgive me, Kyrle! Have mercy, even as you hope for mercy in the great hereafter!"

With a snarling curse Arthur Ovelman sprang forward and his hand fell heavily upon the woman's shoulder.

"Get up, silly girl! How dare you thus disgrace yourself and the name you bear, kneeling at the feet of a convicted felon, pleading to him as though you and not he was the sinner?"

Marjean rose to her feet, but it was only to strike the heavy hand from her shoulder and shrink away from her parent. Her voice was hard and unnatural as she cried:

"You parted us once— you shall never do it again."

even though you were father and mother both—the kindest of parents, instead of the most cruel and tyrannical!"

Stunned and confounded, the capitalist stared at the fair speaker, as though unable to believe the evidence of his own senses. Turning swiftly from him to the detective, her voice changed to one of pleading and overpowering love.

"Kyrle, my love—my all! If I did you wrong in the days gone by, it was because I was compelled to do so, not through my own will. Every word I uttered on that frightful day, ate far deeper into my heart than it could even into yours. Each syllable I was forced to pronounce, cut to my heart keener than a poisoned dagger! You must know this—your heart must tell you all that I have suffered—more on your account than on my own. You know how it ended—how I fell in a deathlike swoon with your curses ringing in my ears; but you do not know that for weary weeks and months I lay on a bed of despair, calling on you for mercy, for pity, for one kind word to wash away the memory of those terrible curses!"

With a convulsive sob her impassioned speech ended, and with her clasped hands pressed against her painfully throbbing bosom, she gazed imploringly into the face of Nor' West Nick, seeking to read there the forgiveness for which she pleaded so eloquently, all heedless of the curious crowd surrounding them, and seeing, hearing none other, with thoughts only for him.

And he? Cold and unmoved he listened, his pale face as calm and unreadable as that of the sphinx, but with a curious light filling his steely-blue eyes. Dan Brown, among others, noted this, but even the keen-witted detective was puzzled to interpret its meaning aright.

"My dear madam," he said, his voice soft and suave, but only with common politeness. "Are you sure you have not made a mistake in the man?"

Once more Arthur Ovelman interposed, his voice trembling with hot anger as he grasped the woman by the arm.

"Come away, girl! Don't you see what a laughing-stock you are making of yourself? Come away, or I'll—"

"Never!" cried the girl, struggling to free herself. "You divided us once by your cunning plotting, but I am not the weak, silly child of those days. Kyrle, by the memory of those happy days I appeal to you! Do not let him tear me away! He will separate us forever!"

Shifting the revolver which he still held in his left hand, Nor' West Nick stepped forward and with a heavy blow from his clinched fist, sent the capitalist reeling back against Dan Brown, whose strong arms instantly closed upon him, holding him harmless.

"Anything else that lies in my power to do to serve you, lady, will be gladly performed; only say the word."

"Take me away—far away from here, and let us forget the terrible past! Say that you forgive me—that the old love is not dead! Oh, Kyrle!" she sobbed, sinking once more upon his breast, hot tears streaming from her eyes, her superb form quivering like a storm-tossed shrub, "if you could realize all that I have suffered, you would forgive the wrong I was forced to do you, though unconsciously, and take me far away from all that can recall the past."

With gentle firmness Nor' West Nick removed her interlocked hands from his neck, holding her a little ways from him as he gazed down into her tearful face with the ghost of a smile playing around his lips.

"My dear madam, you can't imagine how powerfully you are tempting me to commit a serious breach of the law. Any man with warm blood in his veins, instead of milk and water, would know how to forgive me for yielding, but woman—ay! there's the rub!" he said, ruefully.

Marjean, paler than ever, stared into his face as though bewildered, and as he noted that look, Nor' West Nick added:

"Unfortunately we are not in Utah, madam, else the matter might possibly be adjusted."

"What do you mean?" she faltered, clasping her brow and gazing at him with widely-opened eyes.

"That my heart is willing enough, but I am sadly afraid that my wife would seriously object, to say nothing of the statutes against a man's committing bigamy!"

"I—I do not understand," faltered the poor woman, but releasing her hands and falling back a pace. "Surely you are Kyrle Dando! You are only trying me—"

"Or being tried, and that most seriously!" interrupted Nor' West Nick, with a laugh that was almost insulting in its hard significance. "Seriously, madam, you are a perfect stranger to me. I never met you before, never dreamed that there was such a personage in existence until your rather dramatic appearance just now. My name is not Kyrle Dando. I am plain Jack Robinson, better known, perhaps, in these parts, as Nor' West Nick, detective, thief-catcher and rough character, in general. More than that, if any more is needed, I am already married, and have, besides my wife, three fine children, who might seriously object to having a step-mother forced upon them while the real article was to the fore."

With a sobbing gasp, Marjean staggered back and would have fallen to the ground, had not Nor' West Nick leaped to her side and caught her in his arms. Supporting her, he stepped to where Dan Brown still restrained the irate capitalist, and resigning her to his care, said carelessly:

"Take your daughter, old man, and you'll do well to keep a closer watch upon her, or she may come to grief if these spells attack her frequently. All men she encounters may not be quite as conscientious as your humble servant—"

"Dog, liar, thief and forger!" hissed the father, almost suffocating with fury. "You shall suffer for this—"

"Whenever you please, providing always that one of these other scoundrels, who have a prior claim, do not turn me toes-up to the daisies," retorted the detective, with an insolent laugh. "But to set my conscience at rest, be sure you bring a physician's certificate attesting your sanity, for if you and your daughter are not both as crazy as bed-bugs, then I certainly must be!"

"I'll see you again, never fear!" muttered Arthur

Ovelman, with a hard laugh, as he took the unconscious form of his daughter in his arms. "If alive, I will expose you. If dead, I'll see that your record is carved on your tombstone."

"Do so, by all means," laughed the detective. "Since running into this town, I've got so badly mixed up that I am not more than half sure I am what I always have been taught. If you can solve the tangle, I'll owe you a mighty debt of gratitude, and be willing to pay it in any coin you choose."

"Oh, cut it short!" impatiently cried Dick Wheeler, with an oath. "Ef you're gittin' skeart, say so, flat-footed, but don't try to putt off the eend any longer by stuffin' us with wind-puddin'! Ef we're goin' to fight, let's fight!"

"Don't tear your shirt, my fine rascal. The moon is high enough to see you fairly over the range, and the devil will see that you do not go astray after that."

"You won't be the fust man that I've seen slip up on what he pertended he thought was a sure thing," laughed the reckless Maverick-hunter. "I ain't afeared but that I'll live long a-plenty to see your skull the plaything of the coyotes."

"Console yourself with that thought while you can. I'm just in the humor for killing somebody, and I'll begin with you. Say your prayers, if you know any."

Dick Wheeler grinned defiantly, but made no further remark, straightening up and waiting the word which all knew must surely end in the death of at least one of the duelists.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" rung out the measured tones of Dan Brown. "Then, one—two—three—fire!"

At the first number up rose the two revolvers, remaining motionless as the fingers of fate until the word fire was pronounced. Then they both exploded as though drawn by the same finger.

A gasping, gurgling scream broke from the lips of the Maverick-hunter, as he dropped his weapon and raised his hand to his face. In the bright moonlight all could see that the red blood was streaming through his fingers, and with cries of sorrowful rage, his two mates darted toward him, but too late to save him from falling, his body striking the ground with that peculiar, blood-curdling *thud* which comes only from the contact of a corpse with its mother earth.

Steady as a rock stood Nor' West Nick, though a red streak was drawn across one cheek, where the bullet of his enemy had just broken the skin in its passage.

"Number one!" he said, his voice filled with a cold malignancy that chilled the blood of those who heard it. "A dog he lived, and a dog he dies! Now for the others!"

The two cowboys saw that their mate was dead—killed so suddenly by the lead which crashed its way through his brain that it may well be doubted whether he was given time for realizing what hurt him—and they turned upon his slayer with deadly fury, each one demanding the first chance to avenge his fallen comrade.

"Either one—or both at the same time!" cried the border detective, his blue eyes all aglow, his handsome countenance transformed into that of a veritable demon of hatred. "Draw your tools, dogs! Draw, or I'll shoot you down like the ravening wolves you showed yourselves when you had me fouled!"

"Hold!" cried Dan Brown, leaping between the enemies. "The man who touches trigger without my consent must settle with me—"

Nor' West Nick turned upon him, savagely.

"Who the deuce are you, anyhow?" he demanded, hotly. "You have thrust yourself forward quite enough for one evening. You may be a person of authority in this place, but I don't recognize it, for one. Stand aside, or show your reasons!"

"You are anxious to know who I am?" asked the Denver detective, showing his teeth in a peculiar smile.

"If you persist in sticking your fingers into my pie, yes!" was the stern response.

"My name is Dan Brown, of Denver—"

"Dan Brown or Dan Devil, it makes no difference what the name," retorted Nor' West Nick. "What interest have you in this dispute? What right have you to say how I shall fight?"

"The right of being chief of this town, only for to-night," laughed the detective, but with an air of resolution.

The words were scarcely past his lips, when there came a report, and without a groan, the detective fell upon his face!

CHAPTER IX.

WHICH IS WHICH?

NEITHER threat nor warning preceded the report, but sharp and clear it rung forth, and Dan Brown of Denver fell heavily forward upon his face, not a cry, not a moan nor sigh escaping his lips, so well had the treacherous shot done its work.

A cry of angry horror burst from the crowd as they stared around to detect the foul assassin, but the mystery in which the affair was enveloped was only deepened by the confused ideas of the direction from whence the secret shot had emanated. In a score of different directions the angry eyes were turned, and more than one innocent shadow was denounced as the criminal before the mistake was discovered.

Lucky was it for Nor' West Nick that all eyes had been riveted upon him during his brief altercation with the suddenly-stricken man, else the fall at the treacherous shot would have been laid to his charge—as indeed it was, though only as a cover to a deed scarcely less heinous.

"Take that, ye dirty cuss! fer shootin' a man when he wasn't lookin'!" howled Long-legs, leaping forward and firing on the jump, burning to avenge the death of his mate.

"Into ye—chuck—up to—the han'le!" jerked forth Rickety Joe, backing up his fellow, doing his best to keep a straight course and reach his intended victim in the shortest possible series of tacking, filling up the breaks in his explosive threat with pistol-shots.

Wildly the crowd scattered as the ragged lead began to hum viciously around, but Nor' West Nick clinched not.

Up rose his pistol hand, and with the report of his

revolver, the squat Hercules staggered, dropped his weapon, tore convulsively at his left breast with his hands, then whirled half-way around and fell to the ground, shot through the heart, one more victim to the evil passions which seemed to run riot in Rocky Bar that evening.

"Number two!" cried Nor' West Nick, his voice ringing out above the confused tumult with a wild triumph that told how intense was his hatred for these men who had so frightfully misused him. "Your turn, now, Rickety Joe—"

Even as he spoke, he covered the zigzagging figure of the Maverick-hunter, but just as he touched the trigger, a club came whizzing through the air, striking his pistol arm, causing his bullet to go widely astray, knocking the revolver from his hand, while his arm fell helplessly to his side.

A cry, fierce as that of a baffled panther, burst from his lips at this second act of treachery, and he half turned in the direction from whence the missile had come. That involuntary action was the means of saving his life, for a bullet from Rickety Joe's pistol, which would otherwise have pierced his brain, only scorched his temples as though a red-hot iron had been drawn swiftly before his face so close as to almost touch the skin.

Then the noted detective showed the manner of stuff which had given him the name he bore of being one of the most deadly hand-to-hand fighters in all the wild West. A repetition of that fierce, snarling cry—then out flashed his knife, and with it clinched in his left hand, the other swaying helplessly at his side as though the bone had been shattered by that dastard blow, he leaped straight at the oncoming Maverick-hunter.

Despite his nerve, Rickety Joe was startled and taken by surprise by an attack in such an unexpected manner, and though he had time for one more shot before the border detective could come within striking distance, he threw away that chance in his flurry, the lead tearing its way through the close curls of Nor' West Nick, but without breaking the skin. Hastily he cocked his weapon—but that was all.

Swift and deadly as that of a tiger came the last leap of Nor' West Nick, and his gleaming weapon descended like a flash of lightning, even while his body was in the air.

Driven by an arm fired by vengeance and inexpressible hatred, backed by the weight of his whole body, down through felt, hair, flesh and bone sunk the weapon—down to the hilt was driven the long, sharp-pointed blade, pausing only when the guard at the base of the haft was buried in the scalp and denting the bone itself!

With a thrust Nor' West Nick hurled the dying man from him, and whipping forth another revolver, he stood at bay, his eyes aflame, his face that of a man beside himself with rage and indignation. His voice rung out hard and gritty as he faced the crowd, pistol cocked and ready for instant use.

"Who comes next? Where's the coward who struck me from behind? Step out and show yourself, dog and son of a dog! If you are too craven-hearted to face a man on equal terms, bring all your friends and relatives—one or a score—I'll fight you all! It's a man that talks."

From almost any other lips, this fierce challenge would have sounded like empty braggadocio, but a stern and deadly earnestness filled the speaker, and rung out in every tone. On the ground lay the evidence of what he could do with the odds heavily against him. With those stark and ghastly forms revealed by the clear, soft light of the moon, bold indeed would be the man who dared accept that fierce challenge.

A hard, unpleasant laugh broke the momentary silence which followed his defiance, and with a sneer, Nor' West Nick added:

"I might have known it! The hand of a coward cast that club, and such a craven never yet dared to fairly face a man! I will give five hundred dollars for proof of the act."

"And I'll double the sum for one glimpse at the fellow who fired that shot at me!" cried a well-known voice, and Dan Brown, a little unsteady on his feet, but full of pluck as ever, a little rill of blood trickling over his face, moved out toward the border detective. "I'll back you, Nor' West Nick! We were both foully assailed from behind. There's coward's work being done to-night, and if I can strike the right trail, there'll be work for the sexton tomorrow! Come out and show your colors!"

The excited crowd swayed still further back, as though expecting the two detectives to make an indiscriminate attack upon them for the sins of one man or two, but not a man stepped forward in answer to the fierce challenges, not a voice was raised in defense of the cowardly acts, until—

A wild, shrill yell arose, cutting short the rapid speech of the Denver detective—there was the sound of a brief but fierce struggle back on the edge of the crowd, then a voice yelled out:

"Whoop-ee-a! I've got the t'arnal, indignantious 'sassinator what tried to bu'st the boss from ahind! No ye don't! 'Tain't no manner o' use to kick an' squamble! When I gits my grub-hooks fastened onto a critter, he's got to come, even ef he was ten times as slippery as the old sar-pint that fooled gran'-mammy Eve by wringin' in a cold."

"Dug-gun! let up!" cooed another voice, puffing and panting. "You can't tie them boy-constructors 'round my neck; you can't ketch one side o' us—"

Plunging through the crowd, using his powerful shoulders with the effect of a battering-ram, Dan Brown reached the side of the two men, who were none other than those who had laid claim to the title of Nor' West Nick, a little earlier in the evening, now locked in a tight grapple, but with all the advantages in favor of the gangling giant, who had seized his rival from behind by the neck with one hand, the other arm encircling his body and pinning his arms to his side, thus, in a measure, neutralizing his enormous strength.

"Which one of you accuses the other? Which one spoke first?" demanded Dan Brown, his steel-like grip fastening upon them both.

"He did it!" cried the tall man, eagerly. "I see the p'izen critter shoot, an' then you tumbled."

"'Twas that ongainy cuss, boss!" at the same moment vociferated the fat man. "I was watchin' fer somethin' of the sort, an' see him pull trigger."

With an indignant howl they broke off at the same

time, and resumed their fierce struggle, cursing and accusing each other in the same breath.

For an instant Dan Brown seemed puzzled, but then he spoke again, this time enforcing his words with the muzzle of a cocked revolver.

"Enough of this nonsense! I'm going to get to the bottom of this infernal muddle, if I have to run you both through a quartz mill to separate lies from truth! Break holds! Up with your hands! And bear this fact in mind:—If either one of you try to play any tricks, or attempt to break away, before I give you leave, I'll bore you through, if it is the last act I ever perform in this world!"

Thoroughly aroused was the Denver detective, as all who heard his tones could tell, and the brawling rascals were instantly quelled. Releasing each other, they sullenly stood side by side before the threatening pistol, awaiting the detective's further orders. They were not kept long in suspense.

"Right about face! March back to the saloon! Bear in mind the warning I gave you, for I never speak twice to such hang-dog rascals as you have this night proved yourselves."

"Course I'll go," muttered the giant, sullenly obeying, "but all the same it's p'izen hard to be talked to like a dog, when a man has risked his life to sarve another—"

"Prove that, and I'll make whatever amends you like."

"It'll be to me, then, boss!" broke in the fat fellow, or Nickerson, to give him the name he claimed. "That long cuss is givin' you wind. He tried to knock you west-end-an'-crooked, that time, an' then when I rested him—"

A howl of rage broke from the other, and wheeling, he was on the point of leaping upon his rival, when the cold muzzle of Dan Brown's revolver was thrust between them.

"Quiet!" he thundered. "Keep the peace, until I turn you loose to hatch up some more lies and deviltry, or by the Host of Israel! I'll thrash you both out of your boots!"

Highly amused, having already forgotten the dead men they were leaving out in the moonlight, thinking only of a fresh supply of fun with the two oddities, the crowd followed after, entering the gambling-hall, where St. Clair Guthrie still sat shuffling the cards. One careless glance he vouchsafed the intruders, the ghost of a frown seemed to flit over his brow, then fading and leaving it colder, more icy than before. A man of nerve was the sport of Rocky Bar.

"No crowding, gentlemen, if you please—give us room," said Dan Brown, motioning the assembly back, then, turning to his dogged captives, "And you, back up against that wall—no questions or hesitation, but obey or take the consequences."

Back to the side wall fell the two men, only pausing when they could go no further. Again Dan Brown spoke:

"Up with your hands—higher! Rest them flat against the wall, and see that you hold them thus until I give you permission to lower them, or I'll pin them fast with knives. So! With a little more training you would do to lead a puppet show!" and he laughed softly.

"Now I want an unprejudiced man from the crowd to step forward—one will answer," he added, as half the number impulsively started forward at his call. "Jones—as well you as another, provided the prisoners do not object."

"What good would it do us if we did?" sullenly muttered the tall man, who had given his name as Nichols. "'Pears like you're runnin' this circus to suit your own tastes; durn little say-so we're havin' in it, anyway!"

"Yah! what's the matter with you?" cried Nickerson, in a tone of ineffable disgust. "Cain't nothin' suit ye, at all? The boss'll see that we git justice done us both."

"Then you'll roost higher'n any wild turkey this side o' monkey-heaven, with your hoofs on nothin'!" retorted Nichols, with a savage snarl.

"Boss," said Nickerson, coaxingly, "jest turn me loose fer two minits by the watch, while I give this p'izen critter the lickin' that 'tarnal bull cheated him out of. That'll mebbe settle his stumick so he won't be so pesky onreasonable. You'll git along a heap faster ef you do it, ye will, so!"

It was with no little difficulty that Dan Brown kept his face straight, there was something so peculiarly ridiculous in the looks and actions of the rivals, but then, as a twinge in his wounded scalp reminded him of the treacherous shot which had so nearly proved fatal, his sternness returned.

"Save your breath to defend yourselves with, my men, and you will show more wisdom. In one word, which one of you called out first that he had caught the other? It was your voice, I believe?" nodding to Nichols.

The giant nodded, but kept silence. For a wonder, the other did not chime in with a claim, but he only smiled.

"You speak first, then. What did you see this fellow do?"

"Saw him sneak around ontel he got behind you, an' then, when you an' t'other gent was disputin', I see him lift up one arm, to hide the flash of his weapon, though I didn't guess that, jest then. He snoot, then slipped 'round the aidge of the crowd as you tumbled. It tuck me so by s'prise, that I lost sight of him when the crowd scattered. I was goin' to squeal out who did it, but then I thought that he'd mebbe git away in the row ef I did, so I jest waited an' stole 'round to whar I see'd him ag'in. Then I mounted him, an' you know I got treated like a dog fer doin' of it, too!"

"What have you to say to this charge?" demanded Dan Brown, looking at the other man, who was intently listening to the explanation of his rival, a broad smile upon his bruised and blood-stained countenance.

"Not much. Only that what he says is all truth—"

"What! you acknowledge firing that dastardly shot?" demanded the detective, his blue eyes, flashing dangerously.

"Not much I don't!" promptly declared the fellow, with a vigorous shake of his head as added emphasis. "You cut me off afore I'd got fairly started. I said that it was all the dead-center truth, 'cept that I pulled the trigger. He did the shootin', I did the watchin' an' waitin' an' bouncin' when the right time come—"

"Careful!" warned Brown. "He had you from

behind when the alarm was given. If you grasped him, how do you account for that fact?"

"Cause the pizen imp is slipper than a chunk o' fat pork, an' kin wiggle all 'round a feller like he was a sarpiant horn without the least sign o' backbone! That's as nigh as I kin tell the tale, an' whar's the Bible fer to take my swear onto? Ef you say so, I'll kiss it to a blister."

"One of you two has lied, and I believe I can find out the sinner by a simpler method than by questioning you. Jones, take a look at the pistols which those rascals carry. That may give us an inkling of the truth."

The man designated advanced and drew the pistols one after the other from the belts with which the rivals were girded. A sharp exclamation burst from his lips as he held up the revolver last taken from Nichols.

"One empty barrel, and the nipple shows that it was discharged quite recently—this evening, sure!" he explained.

"How are the other weapons?" demanded the detective.

"All charged, and showing no signs of being recently discharged," was the prompt reply.

"What have you to say to this evidence?" and Brown gazed sternly into the giant's face as he spoke.

Intense bewilderment was written on every feature of the fellow's face as he saw the apparently conclusive proof of his criminality, taken from his own person, but then his face lightened, and a howl of rage burst from his lips.

"That cunnin' cuss did it! I felt him fingerin' at my belt, while I held him, but thought he was only tryin' to git a weepion to shoot me. The dirty imp changed pistols on me. But it won't work; my initials is on both o' my weapons."

"By heavens!" exclaimed Jones in amazement, as he closely scrutinized the weapons. "They are marked—N. N.—but if you can tell them apart, you're smarter than I am!"

The frown deepened on the detective's face, and his lips were tightly compressed as he examined the weapons. They were all four of the same make and size. Each one bore the same initials, N. N., and in the same place. To whom did the one with an empty chamber really belong? If taken from the giant, might it not be as he said—that Nickerson, fearing exposure and consequent punishment, had taken advantage of the struggle to remove a damning proof and fasten it on his enemy?

Hardly probable, but plainly possible, and the giant was given the benefit of the doubt for fear of an injustice.

"I'm tired of this infernal muddle!" cried Brown, with a grimace of disgust, casting the weapons at the rivals' feet. "Take your weapons and go; but mind; if I find out the truth, I will follow you into the flames of Hades itself but what I'll make the guilty one smart for this night's work!"

"One moment, if you please," said a stern voice, as Nor' West Nick entered the circle and confronted the two men. "I understand that you two rascals have been masquerading under a name which belongs solely to me. Now I give you fair warning that if you ever dare to sail under my colors again, and I hear of it, I will hunt you out, strip off your borrowed plumes—and take the hide with it into the bargain!"

"Our names is our own!" sullenly muttered Nichols.

"So is mine, and I choose to wear it a little longer. You have your warning. Neglect it, and take the consequences."

Turning upon his heel, Nor' West Nick was leaving the room into which he had first entered in such an extraordinary manner, when a hand was placed upon his shoulder. Turning swiftly, with an angry frown, he was confronted by the cool, smiling face of the Denver detective.

"What do you want?" rudely demanded the border detective, flinging off the detaining hand. "I'm not in the most agreeable mood, just now, and if you're a wise man, you'll let me alone before you get into trouble. Is that plain enough?"

"More than plain enough," and Brown showed his teeth in a careless smile. "If you are spooling for a fight, I'll accommodate you, with pleasure, my dear sir."

"When, where and how?" sharply demanded the other.

"After I have had a few moments' conversation with you."

"Spit it out, then, and cut it short, too!"

"Not here, nor now. Please follow me, I mean business."

CHAPTER X.

WHO WAS THE TARGET?

For a moment Nor' West Nick hesitated, gazing keenly into the face of the Denver detective as though striving to read there the secret motives which moved him to insist upon an interview in private after such a rude rebuff at the outset. But the face of the sphinx itself was not more incomprehensible than that of Dan Brown when he wished it to be so, and seeming to divine this, Nor' West Nick flung out one hand with a careless gesture, while a faint smile came into his face.

"Have your own way, my dear sir. Lead on and I'll follow. But I hope that your business is worthy all the trouble you are putting me to, for your sake!"

Dan Brown laughed softly at the implied threat, but seeing how eagerly the crowd was listening to each spoken word, he made no response, turning and speaking rapidly, but with a pointedness that was not lost on his audience:

"Good-night, gentlemen. We'll be on hand if any questions are to be asked about those fellows lying outside, but just now we have other business. If there are any others in this crowd who owe us a grudge, they are at liberty to follow. Our friends will go about their own business, and not run the risk of being knocked over by a cowardly club-slinger, or snap-shot from under cover. A word to the wise, you know!"

With a bow that savored far more strongly of mockery than of politeness, Dan Brown turned upon his heel and crossed the threshold of Aladdin's Cave, followed in silence by Nor' West Nick upon whose face that hard, defiant expression had once more settled.

Was it the sight of the three Maverick-hunters, lying there in the moonlight, ghastly evidence of the injury he had suffered, and of the terribly thorough revenge he had exacted? Or was it suspicion of the man whose footsteps he was following, that caused the border detective to come to an abrupt halt not far from where dead Dick Wheeler lay?

"We've gone far enough," he said, his voice sounding cold and hard. "Say what you have to say, and be done with it. Little fear of eavesdroppers here!" and he glanced from one corpse to the others with a short, metallic laugh.

"Why do you use that tone? What have I done since our first meeting to-night to arouse your distrust so thoroughly?" asked Dan Brown, betraying a degree of curiosity such as he rarely suffered to show itself on the surface.

"Instinct, I suppose," replied Nor' West Nick, with a peculiar shrug of the shoulders. "It rarely plays me a trick, and from the first moment our eyes met, I felt that there would come a fight to the death between you and me. I feel that premonition more strongly than ever now."

Dan Brown laughed softly before replying to this speech.

"It may be true; I may have to arrest you before all is done; but just now I ask a truce, and perfect confidence in each other. Will you consent?"

"What for? What is it you want?" still suspiciously.

"First, to look to your hurts, and dress them properly. Second, to have a confidential talk with you, on a subject which I am quite sure you will find highly interesting and well worth the trouble I am putting you to."

"Look here!" and Nor' West Nick squarely confronted the Denver detective, his eyes aglow, his face hard-set. "That you are a man of no little influence in this burg, the manner in which you rode roughshod over yonder gang shows plain enough. They took your word for the genuineness of my papers, without even asking for a sight, and even these bull-headed scoundrels," with a nod toward the dead "quietly yielded to your decision. You talk as though you had the power to arrest me, if such a fancy should strike you. Now, not to pick and choose, what's your name, and who the deuce are you, anyhow?"

"A man who wishes to be your friend, if you will permit. As for my name, that I gave you once, but it is easily repeated—Dan Brown; I am called Dan Brown of Denver."

"Not the famous detective of that name?"

"I have been a detective—am one still, for that matter," laughed Brown, carelessly. "As for the famous part of it, that is purely a matter of opinion."

"You are the only man that would dare dispute your right to the title, then," and with more cordiality than he had yet betrayed, Nor' West Nick extended his hand, which was warmly clasped. "I don't know exactly what I have said, for I have undergone enough to turn a steadier brain than I can boast of possessing, since the sun last set, but if any of my blind blows struck you, pray consider them apologized for."

"A blind man could see that you were hardly responsible for your words and actions; and little wonder. But let's move on to where we can talk more comfortably. Have a cigar?"

Nor' West Nick accepted the offer, and both struck a match. Brown succeeded in lighting his cigar, but a little gust of wind extinguished the other match, and with a short mutter of impatience Nor' West Nick held out his hand for the lighted cigar, but before Dan Brown could remove it from between his lips, there came a peculiar, whirring sound, a flash of light seemed to pass between the twain, and then came the clatter of steel hoofs striking upon the flinty ground.

From the deep shadow cast by a building behind, and a little to the left of their position, a long knife had been hurled with deadly force, striking the lighted cigar from the lips of the Denver detective, filling his eyes with fire and ashes, cutting a gash in the left shoulder of Nor' West Nick, then glancing on and spending its force upon the senseless ground beyond.

Instinctively the two men leaped apart, a curse breaking from the lips of Dan Brown as he tried to clear his eyes of the smarting particles, an angry cry escaping the other detective as his hand fell upon his ready revolver.

Both heard the sudden thumping of a horse's hoofs on the rocky soil, and catching a momentary glimpse of a shadow dashing away, Nor' West Nick flung forward his revolver and took a snap-shot; there was time for no more.

Back came floating a mocking laugh; then the words:

"Missed again! but the third time's the charm. Beware!"

Active as a cat, Nor' West Nick leaped forward, pistol half-raised, but in vain his eager eyes looked for the would-be assassin. Only the rapidly receding sounds of the hoof-strokes told in what direction the unknown was fleeing.

"No use!" muttered Dan Brown, who had followed quickly. "We couldn't catch him without horses, and them we haven't got. Come; that crack has been heard, and the crowd is on foot. We don't care to be deafened with questions."

Into the deeper shadow he darted, closely followed by Nor' West Nick, and running noiselessly along for a few rods, they came back into the main street not far from the Arlington, in which Dan Brown had a room.

Entering the hotel, Brown led the way up-stairs to his little chamber, closing and locking the door after they entered. A slight smile curled the lip of Nor' West Nick as he noted this precaution, but no remark concerning it escaped his lips as he sunk into a chair and glanced swiftly around the room, taking in every detail at a single sweep.

"Not a palatial residence," laughed the Denver detective, turning the flame of the oil lamp higher, "especially for a man blessed with a charming housekeeper, when he is at home, but it will answer. And now, my dear fellow, allow me to look at your injuries. It won't be the first time I have played the surgeon, and successfully too!"

"It's hardly worth while," smiled Nor' West Nick, yet yielding far enough to throw off his tattered coat which spoke eloquently of the terrible skill with which the Maverick-hunters had wielded their

whips. "A few bits of court-plaster will mend all breaks, I reckon."

An exclamation of indignation escaped the lips of Dan Brown as he saw the blood-red welts and wales which almost covered the person of his new-found friend and ally.

"I heartily beg your pardon, my friend," he cried, his face flushed hotly. "I thought you more of a demon than a man with a heart, back there, when you killed those fellows, but now I don't blame you, if this is their work!"

"Rather unceremonious, wasn't it?" laughed the other, but it was a laugh totally devoid of mirth, hard and bitter. "True, they believed, or pretended to believe, that I was the notorious robber, Captain Slyboots; but they did not even take the trouble to search me for proofs, but took it all for granted. What I suffered during that frightful ride, both in body and mind, would have transformed an angel into a demon incarnate. I never claimed to be the first. I swore, every time that I felt their cruel lashes, that I would kill the one who plied the whip, and I kept my word. I do not regret having their blood on my hands. If I could, I would bring them back to life, only that I might have the grim satisfaction of once more sending them to eternal flames!"

Despite his nerve, Dan Brown felt a cold chill creeping along his spinal column as he listened. There was no fiery outburst, no ranting, no excited gesticulation. Cold and even were the tones of the detective as he spoke. His features were hard set, and only the red light which filled his eyes told of the deadly hatred with which his heart was still filled to overflowing.

In silence he finished his work, completing the task with neatness and dispatch, when Nor' West Nick replaced his tattered coat and resumed his seat.

"Some time I will thank you for your kindness to a stranger," he said, speaking with an evident effort. "Just now I am too sore, both in body and mind, to say much."

"No thanks are needed," was the quick reply.

"I owe you thanks, rather, for yielding to my whim and coming here, especially as in doing so, you received one of your hurts."

"Then you think that that knife was meant for your benefit, not mine?" asked Nor' West Nick, with interest.

"You heard what he said about missing again, and the third time being the charm? The first time was when I fell at that shot from behind," and Brown gingerly touched his head.

"Let me play surgeon, in turn," said Nor' West Nick, rising. "My brain is so upset by all that I have gone through, that I had completely forgotten."

With a faint smile Dan Brown submitted, and carefully parting the curling locks near the top of his head, Nor' West Nick held the lamp so that its light fell upon the injury—a furrow through the scalp, several inches in length, so deep that it seemed a miracle the detective had escaped without a shattered skull.

"A mighty close call, my friend!" exclaimed Nor' West Nick, replacing the light and taking up the scissors which Brown had used in cutting the slips of court-plaster. "A little lower or to the right, and you would never have known what it was that hurt you; the width of the bullet would have been more than enough. You'll have to sacrifice a few of your love-locks. That, with a little court-plaster to draw the edges together, and you'll be all right."

"I've nothing to say," laughed Brown, lightly; "I'm only the patient, now, while you're the surgeon."

The wound was quickly dressed, then Nor' West Nick resumed:

"You think, then, that the same hand cast that knife and fired the shot? If so, it could hardly have been either of those rascals who were masquerading under my name, for the voice was altogether different from theirs."

"No; I was satisfied that neither of them fired the shot, else they would not have escaped me so easily. The long fellow accused the other, to get even with him for his defeat in the saloon, but the fat rascal was too cunning for him and slipped out of the trap."

"Have you any idea what their object was in playing the part they did? They must have known that they would be detected and exposed sooner or later."

"It's all a puzzle to me," confessed Dan Brown, evasively, clearly preferring not to make a confidant of the border detective, just yet. "That they are both precious rascals is a self-evident fact, and unless they levant in a hurry I may take a notion to investigate them, more thoroughly."

"Exactly," assented Nor' West Nick, concealing a yawn with his hand. "I'd like to see the outcome, and possibly I may. But this was not what you brought me here for?"

"No, not exactly," was the slow response. "I hope you will not think I am actuated altogether by an idle curiosity, or trying to crowd myself into your confidence."

That short, hard laugh cut his speech short.

"In other words, you want to know all about myself and that charming young lady who tried her best to make me turn Mormon, back yonder; am I not right?"

"Partly yes, partly no. Let me give you a little explanation first, then you will see how I came to be interested in the matter."

"I happen to own a rather good thing here, in the shape of a mine, known as the Jealous Girl—a title selected by the original owner, who, I fancy, was more lucky in prospecting than in love; but let that pass."

"Some time since a man named Arthur Ovelman opened a correspondence with me, concerning the sale of this mine. I named my terms, for cash, and the last coach brought him out here to personally inspect the property. He was accompanied by a young lady, his daughter, I believe. At his request I called upon him, at his rooms in this hotel, early this evening. While with him, I first saw the lady in question. She acted rather strangely, I fancied."

"Her brain is affected, no doubt, poor thing," said Nor' West Nick, with a careless yawn behind his palm.

"So I fancied, from the very first," quietly added the Denver detective. "And this impression was

deepened when, during the temporary absence of her father from the room, she came forward and knelt at my feet, much as she afterward did to you, begging me to tell her where she could find a man by the name of St. Clair Guthrie, whom she appeared to believe was living in Rocky Bar."

"You satisfied her desire, of course?"

Was it only his imagination, or was there a tremor in the voice with which Nor' West Nick uttered these words? Was he more deeply interested in the matter than he cared to show? Were the woman and her father right, when they called him Kyrle Dando? Was he indeed a runaway convict?

All these queries flashed through the brain of Dan Brown, during his momentary pause, after that careless question. But in vain did he try to read the truth of his suspicions in the marble-like countenance of the detective.

"No. I had not time for one reason. We heard the returning footsteps of her father, and she had only time to beg me to keep her secret from him, and to make an appointment with me for tomorrow. I promised, of course, but with a mental proviso, and glad enough was I when the old gentleman proposed to leave me company in a stroll through town. Of course I would not break the pledge I had given her, but I meant that he should have a look at this St. Clair Guthrie, to see if he would recognize him. For that reason I led the way to Aladdin's Cave, the saloon into which you came so dramatically."

"And the result was?" queried Nor' West Nick.

"Not altogether satisfactory," admitted Brown. "At first I thought I had struck bed-rock, for the old gentleman started when first seeing the man put on his glasses and stared at him closely; but he seemed to realize his mistake, for after that he went to betting like a thoroughbred."

"What reputation does this St. Clair Guthrie bear?"

"That of a cold-blooded, slippery scoundrel, though there can be nothing positively criminal brought against him—at least there has not been, so far as I am aware."

"That is interesting tidings!" said Nor' West Nick.

"What do you mean?" demanded the surprised detective.

"Nothing much—only I believe you are talking about my brother!" coolly responded Nor' West Nick, smiling blandly.

CHAPTER XI.

NOR' WEST NICK TELLS A STORY.

DAN BROWN stared at the speaker in undisguised amazement, scarcely able to believe his ears, but the border detective calmly endured his scrutiny, a faint smile upon his face.

"Your brother! St. Clair Guthrie!" muttered Brown.

"To the best of my present knowledge and belief—yes," was the quiet response. "It is barely possible that there may be some mistake, but my information came straight enough and bore all the appearance of credibility."

"He was in the saloon while you were,"

"You forget that just then I was not in the humor, even if fit otherwise, to claim relationship with anybody, or to scan faces other than those of the hell-hounds who—but let that pass. They have met with their reward here on earth, and I'll try to forget their dastardly conduct," said Nor' West Nick, abruptly breaking off.

"Granting that you were in the condition you claim, still he was on the alert and keen-eyed enough, though he pretended to take matters so easily. Surely he must have recognized you, and if so, he would have taken a hand in the game. No; I reckon your trail is a false one. I hope so, for your own sake," soberly added the Denver detective.

"It's clear enough that you have not a very high opinion of my worthy brother, if brother he be," said Nor' West Nick, with a laugh, reaching over and selecting a cigar from the open box which stood on the little table between them, then settling himself more comfortably in his chair.

"Which you will find is the popular one outside of his immediate friends and followers," said Brown, gravely.

"Sort of black sheep, eh? Skins his customers on both sides?" asked the other, leaning back and watching the tiny rings of blue smoke slowly widening as they ascended.

"No; I believe he carries on a square game. If there was any doubt on that point, he would hardly have remained here so long. But suppose we let the subject drop?"

"Through delicacy for me? My dear sir, if our acquaintance lasts long, you will find that I have the hide of a rhinoceros—metaphorically speaking. As for—my brother, I gave him up as a bad egg long ago, and only for a rather peculiar combination of circumstances, I should not have taken the trouble I have to search him out at this late day."

"Then you expected to meet him here?"

"To either meet him or find some clue to his whereabouts—yes," was the quiet response of Nor' West Nick.

"You say that you did not see, did not notice him?" Dan Brown said slowly, feeling a strange interest in the case, though it might have puzzled him to explain just why he should. "Then how are you so positive that St. Clair Guthrie, as he is known in Rocky Bar, is your brother?"

"Partly by the clue which led me to this place, but even more from what happened this evening, and your own words," was the response, as Nor' West Nick assumed a more serious air.

Dan Brown laughed, a little annoyed at having shown such curiosity in a case which surely could not intimately concern him. He would not give another chance for a rebuff.

"All that concerns you more nearly than it does me. I don't ask for—don't want your confidence any further than you choose to give it, in case you think I can be of any service to you," he said, somewhat coldly.

"Oh, there's no secret on my part," frankly returned the other. "My business is very simple, and ten minutes' talk with Mr. Guthrie will suffice to settle that. But as you have been let have a peep behind the scenes already, I've concluded to tell you the whole history—provided you care to listen."

"Of course you have the right to tell it—pardon me, but I was thinking of the lady, Miss Ovelman. She might object—for the story concerns her, of course?"

"What all the newspapers of the land have published, without reserve, can hardly be considered a secret," and Nor' West Nick smiled slightly.

"Then I will listen, and count the time well spent, for somehow I have taken a powerful interest in that unfortunate young lady and her history—"

"Lucky that charming housekeeper of yours didn't see your face when you uttered those words!" cried Nor' West Nick, with an unpleasant laugh.

"My wife and I understand each other perfectly," was the cold reply. "My interest in the matter rose solely from conviction that Miss Ovelman had been terribly wronged."

"Possibly she was; possibly you will find that the shoe was fitted upon quite a different pair of feet. But I'll tell you the story, and let you judge for yourself."

"Thirty odd years ago, a pair of twins were born to a worthy couple named—never mind! Names are plenty; I have several of them myself, as you may have observed. Besides, the parents have little to do with what I have to tell, and my brother seems to have taken a fancy to the romantic title of St. Clair Guthrie, which will serve to call him by in this little history, as well as that by which he was christened."

"We were left orphans at an early age, with a goodly supply of this world's goods, held in trust for us by an easy-going old bachelor uncle. The jolliest and best of guardians, we thought, though it might have been better for us both if he had been stricter, and kept his purse-strings closer."

"We lived in New York, and as our family was an old one of the true blood, you can imagine the sort of life we led, after coming into our property. And yet, I have often wondered why we did not turn out even worse than was the case, all things considered. But a truce to moralizing."

"Brother and I quarreled over some trifle, soon after reaching our majority. I knocked him down and gave him a sound thumping, then packed up and struck out in the world, to see life in other aspects. Just consider that that lets me out of the story, save as a narrator of what I afterward learned, when thousands of miles away."

"Brother went into business, after sowing a goodly quantity of wild oats, which cut down his capital more than one-half. It was considered a terrible descent, in the circles through which he had until then moved, and the result was a series of cuts direct, which soon cured him of any desire to hold his old place in society. As a result, he met and fell in love with a young lady, whose father was a shrewd operator on 'Change—but you have seen him—Arthur Ovelman."

Dan Brown uttered an exclamation of surprise, for he had not suspected this turn in the least. And yet, as he looked keenly into the face of Nor' West Nick, he could trace there a strong resemblance to the Rocky Bar sport; shape, size, complexion, and general cast of features. Stranger things far had happened than that these two men should be twin brothers.

Nor' West Nick nodded coolly as he knocked the ashes from the tip of his cigar.

"I see that you have struck the true scent at last, and I am not sorry. You can imagine a good many of the points, and I will be spared so much breath. But to go on with my story."

"Arthur Ovelman was, and is yet—for such men are dyed in the grain, and seldom change in this life—hard, keen and shrewd. His sole god was money, and his measure of a man consisted in the amount of ready cash which he could command. When that is understood, you can readily believe that he did not follow the example of his daughter, and fall over head and ears in love with my worthy brother—just the contrary; he hated him as only such a man can hate an obstacle to the completion of his dearest wish—in this case a project to marry Marjean to a Wall street operator old enough to be her grandfather, but with more money than he could count."

"Unfortunately for the success of his plans, the young lady had a will of her own, as you must have seen this evening, and she refused to yield her consent to the sacrifice. More than that, she hastened to tell all to my brother."

"That same evening he called upon the magnate, and fairly forced his way in to him after being denied."

"As a natural consequence, the old gentleman was in a delightful humor, and wonderfully inclined to grant all that a passionate lover could demand—that as a matter of course!"

"And yet, when he took his departure, my brother was far more elated than when he set out to beard the money-bags in his lair, for he believed that not far distant in the future he could see a bridal with himself as one of the principal actors—of course Miss Ovelman was the other."

"In fact, he had been accepted by Ovelman as a prospective son-in-law—on conditions which he was just sanguine enough to believe he could speedily fulfill. Poor devil! he was to have his eyes opened soon enough."

"The cunning old scoundrel told him that no man should wed his daughter until he could show him a bank account equal to that of his own, but he softened this blow by adding that he would gladly give my brother all valuable pointers which he could command if he concluded to venture on the street as a full-fledged operator in stocks—speculator sounded too coarse for the taste of the old gentleman."

"You can guess what was the result quite as readily as I can tell you. The pointers were given promptly enough, but somehow they always cut the wrong way, and instead of seeing his bank account mounting rapidly toward the high figures which Ovelman had mentioned, he soon had none at all, while his legitimate business was becoming terribly cramped for want of ready cash."

"I don't say that brother was a complete fool, when he was in his sober senses, but at that period of his life he was more of a madman than a sane being. He loved Marjean Ovelman as it is in the power of few men to love. She was his day-star, his heaven upon earth, and the cunning hopes of winning her, which were still held out by the old man, urged him still deeper into the quicksands, until the day came when he saw that, unless he

could raise a large sum of money in ready cash, he must go to the wall and lose every penny which he still had in his business. Never mind the details—that is the gist of the matter. There was only one consolation—neither crime nor dishonor could as yet be laid at his door."

"Instinct as well as reason told him that it would be worse than useless to apply to Arthur Ovelman. More than once of late days he had felt a growing suspicion that the cunning old rat was playing a double part—that these pointers, which were to carry him on the flood-tide of fortune to the glorious prize before him, had been given him with a very different end in view—in short, that Ovelman was leading him to bet one way, while he was coolly raking down the stakes by following the directly contrary way."

"For this reason he sought the daughter instead, at an hour when he knew the father would be absent, and as well as he could, for the emotion which, for the time being, wholly unmanned him, he told her everything."

"She was greatly shocked, for she had been brought up in the very atmosphere of money and money-making, yet she tried to find some gleam of hope for him, or made him feel that such was her purpose in questioning him so closely. Whether that was the correct solution, let the sequel answer."

"They parted, with renewed hope in the heart of my brother. Her words had that effect. She bade him hope. She believed she could obtain the money for him, as a loan—not from her father, for, hard pressed as he was he shrank sensitively from that—but by the sale of some bonds which he held in her own right. So she said, and so he believed."

"The morning's mail brought him a note, signed by Marjean Ovelman. In it was a check, signed by Arthur Ovelman, for the exact amount which she had promised to send him. She said that her father objected to her disposing of the bonds, and by close questioning had drawn the whole story from her. On hearing the amount needed to tide my brother over, he sat down and filled out the inclosed check. She ended by begging him to use it as freely as she would accept a favor from him under equally urgent needs."

"He hastened to the house, but both father and daughter were gone—called away to Washington by a telegram was the answer he received. The servants could not give an address by which they might be reached by a telegram, and so my brother was forced to bottle his gratitude, and use the money so unexpectedly obtained."

"This he did, and fancied that the worst was past, when the thunderbolt fell. He was arrested for forging the name of Arthur Ovelman!"

Nor' West Nick flung aside the stump of his cigar, helped himself to another, eyeing the Denver detective closely while lighting it, as though seeking to read what impression his story had produced. Gravely Dan Brown said:

"When you have finished, and if you still desire my opinion, I will give it to you. Just now I'd rather listen."

"The rest is easily told and will not take long."

"The case came to trial in due course of time, and my brother stood at the bar, accused of forgery, with the evidence overwhelmingly against him. Arthur Ovelman took the stand and swore that he had never written that check. It was a nearly-perfect imitation of his signature, but there were enough minor discrepancies to satisfy an expert that it was none of his work. And this evidence was confirmed by several of those ingenious gentry. They proved it an impossibility for Arthur Ovelman to have written either the body of the check, or the signature. And more than that, they went on to show that it was not only a possibility, but a strong probability that the accused *did* write it all."

"At the outset, the prisoner, stunned and bewildered, had let his lawyer get an inkling of the truth, and though he afterward declared that let the case go as it would, Marjean should not be summoned to fill the witness stand, when his counsel saw how overwhelmingly the tide was flowing against his client, acting on his own responsibility, he had the young lady brought forward and sworn."

"What did she say? Very prettily told all about that interview, acknowledged the hope which she gave the young man; but then declared that she had not been able to keep her half-pledge. Her father had refused to permit her to sell her property, and she, being under age, could not do so without his permission. She besought her parent to give her enough to tide her betrothed over the crisis, but this was also refused. It would only go into the maw of speculation, and he had no money to throw away when no good end could be served. No, she said, sobbingly, in answer to a sharp question, 'she had not set that check; would to heaven that she could truthfully say otherwise,' and she broke down into a flood of tears."

"Very affecting, was it not?" asked Nor' West Nick, with a sneering laugh. "And even as she spoke, the accused saw the very notes she had written him, covering the check, held in the hand of his lawyer, close beside him. When that was produced—as he now knew his lawyer intended doing—what would be the result? He might be cleared of this shameful charge, but at what a cost to her—the woman whom, even now, when he knew that her beautiful lips were soiled black as hell itself with perjury, he loved better than his own life—ay! better than his honor and good name!"

"What did he do?" Reached forward and pinched the lawyer so sharply upon the hand which held the damning paper, that his fingers opened as he uttered a cry of pain. Quick as thought the paper was in the prisoner's hand, then in his mouth, and, chewing away as though upon the sweetest morsel man was ever favored with, he fought back the excited lawyer, who was striving to rescue the note which would have cast all the shame and sin upon other shoulders, and swallowed it!

"In a fit of anger, the lawyer told all, then threw up the case. The prisoner calmly denied the story, declaring that no such note had ever been written, but declining to say what the paper had contained, or what his reason for such an extraordinary action."

"Other counsel was assigned him by the court, and the trial went on. It was still more one-sided now. The prosecuting attorney, as in duty bound, made the best of his case. He denounced the affair as a cunning trick to save the accused, but which

the wonderful acumen displayed by the experts present had disconcerted. For fear another forgery should be fastened upon him, the accused had swallowed the prepared paper, knowing that the truth would prevail.

"The end of it was that my brother received a sentence of ten years for forgery."

"While waiting to be sent to the State's prison, to which he had been sentenced, Marjean Ovelman called upon him. During that brief interval, my brother had had time to reflect, and though he did not regret what he had done, to save her name from shame, his love for her died so utterly that when she came to him, all traces of weakness vanished, and he poured out upon her head the vials of his wrath, finally cursing her for having made a wreck of his life. She swooned at his feet, and was carried away by the jailer, whom he summoned for that purpose. He never saw her again, that I am aware of."

"But another woman came to see him—an out-cast, some might call her, but she possessed the one great virtue of fidelity to the man whom she loved."

"I can't tell you just how it was all carried out, but I know that this woman aided my brother to escape from jail on the very eve of the day he was to have been transferred to Sing Sing. They were followed, but there was a frightful railroad accident, and she was found among the dead. With her was another body, frightfully mangled about the head and face, but it was identified as that of my brother, and the pursuit was ended, almost ere it began."

Nor' West Nick ceased speaking and rose from his chair.

"I have redeemed my promise, when I add that my brother was not killed in that accident. He escaped, and to the best of my belief, is yet living—is here in Rocky Bar, turned professional gambler, and bearing the name of St. Clair Guthrie."

Dan Brown also arose, a peculiar smile on his face.

"A strange story, and explaining much that occurred this evening. Do you still desire my candid opinion of the matter?"

"If you choose to give it," carelessly replied the other.

"Then—the story you have told me is that of—not St. Clair Guthrie, or your brother, but your own."

"You are wrong. The story is my brother's," coldly said Nor' West Nick, unlocking the door and leaving the room.

CHAPTER XII.

NOR' WEST NICK MAKES HIS BOW.

ARTHUR OVELMAN was in anything but an angelic humor as he half-carried, half-dragged the form of his unconscious daughter away from the spot where she had received such a cruel rebuff from the man whom she believed to be Kyrie Dando, once her betrothed, almost husband.

Thick and fast, dark and ugly thoughts and hopes flashed athwart his busy brain as he hastened with his helpless burden back to the Arlington, passing through the deserted bar, up the stairs and into the chamber assigned to his daughter, without meeting a soul to question him. All Rocky Bar was out witnessing the "circus."

Dropping his fair, white charge upon the bed, Arthur Ovelman hastened to assure himself that she was living, for, after his own fashion, he loved his child.

With a faint moan, Marjean averted her face, pushing his hand away, and, satisfied that she had received no serious harm, the capitalist retreated and sunk into a chair, his face resting upon his clinched fists, as he stared vacantly at the trembling figure of his daughter, a smoldering fire in his stern eyes, a savage scowl upon his brow.

Until that evening he had not entertained the slightest doubt but that the body which was found beside, almost clasped in the arms of the dead woman who was known to have effected the escape of the man condemned for forgery, was other than that of Kyrie Dando.

If his countenance was grave and his voice subdued when he alluded to the unfortunate affair, his heart was singing a jubilee. A dangerous obstruction had been removed from his path forever—so he told himself.

For weeks and months his daughter hovered on the confines of death, and from her wild ravings then he knew that she had been to call on the condemned, and that the truth had been told her, but he little cared for that. The proof had vanished, and though Marjean might for a time believe the wild assertion, time would reconcile her and him—then for his pet project, with no obstacle in the way.

The scowl grew deeper as he recalled that interview, the first which had occurred between himself and Marjean, after she was pronounced convalescent by her physicians.

The storming was all on his side. Icy cold the girl met and defeated him. She bade him abandon all thoughts of marrying her to the man of his choice, unless he wished her to abandon him forever and proclaim the dark secret to the whole world. He laughed at her threats in the face of the declaration of the convicted forger, but all the same he was afraid to push her to extremities, and felt a certain sense of relief when the news was flashed all over the great city of the finding of his wished-for son-in-law dead in his bed—apoplexy.

From that day, though living on terms of outward cordiality, the father and child were little better than strangers to each other, and the question of marriage was never alluded to between them. Arthur Ovelman had not the slightest doubt as to the death of Kyrie Dando, and he never knew but that Marjean held the same belief.

Why should she think otherwise?

Scores of his once intimate friends had examined the mangled remains, and positively identified them as those of the fleeing convict. If not his, surely some one would have claimed them, or there would have been inquiries made concerning some missing party.

At first Marjean did believe this, but then there came a change.

One night, at the opera, she saw a face which she could never forget—the face of Kyrie Dando, pale and stern, just as she had seen it on that frightful day in jail, when she had fallen at his feet, stunned by his terrible curses. She seemed to hear them

now, and with an inarticulate cry she sunk in a swoon from her chair.

When her senses returned she was at home, and her lips were tightly locked when Arthur Ovelman closely questioned her as to the cause of her sudden indisposition.

Not a word would she utter, fearing lest she betray her secret, and set him on the track of the man whom he had once hunted to the very portals of death.

From that hour she had but one object in life—to find Kyrie Dando, and convince him that she had ever been true to her love; that she, too, had been made the victim of a heartless forgery. But fate seemed against her.

The owner of that accusing face had vanished, whether it belonged to Kyrie Dando or a stranger—a chance resemblance.

She feared to enlist the services of a detective lest he should perform his duty too well, and finding the man, bring him to the bar to answer for his wonderful escape—and so the weary years rolled on.

Of all this Arthur Ovelman knew nothing, had not the faintest suspicion, and it is only shadowed forth here to explain much of what has already been placed before the reader.

As the capitalist sat there, moodily thinking, he remembered that his curiosity had been awakened by the words used by Dan Brown in speaking of St. Clair Guthrie. He saw that the Denver detective was watching him closely after briefly introducing him to the gambler, and this fact perhaps led him to scrutinize the sport more closely than would otherwise have been the case. He was conscious of a vague feeling of wonder as to whether, in the days gone by, they had not met, for there was something in the face of St. Clair Guthrie that seemed familiar, but the longer he looked the fainter grew the resemblance, and giving up the attempt, he turned to the gaming table with all the old relish.

He could see now the resemblance between the two men, though he had not recognized Nor' West Nick as Kyrie Dando until that strange appearance of Marjean upon the scene.

Still blacker grew the scowl, and unconsciously to himself, his thoughts found audible utterance.

"This time I'll make sure work. I'll kill the dog with my own hand if he lives through this night!"

"And I swear to bring you to the gallows if you dare to harm one hair of his head!" cried Marjean, suddenly rising to a sitting posture upon the bed, her dark eyes all aglow.

Arthur Ovelman stared at her in amazement for a moment, but then a grim smile curled his lips.

"So! you have concluded to come to? I am glad of it. I am anxious for a little talk with you, my lady."

"You have said enough—too much—"

"All the same, I mean to say still more," was his rude interruption. "A pretty spectacle you have been making of yourself this evening, haven't you?"

"Who made it necessary?" sharply demanded the woman, undaunted by his rage. "You—by your cunning trickery, by your crime—for you know, as I know, that Kyrie Dando was the innocent victim of your crime—that you committed that reputed forgery, and then deliberately perjured yourself, in order to ruin him forever."

"I know that your brain is cracked on that subject, and though I would hate to bring the taint upon our name, if you keep on in that vein I shall be compelled, in self-defense, to place you where that delusion may be robbed of its sting, if not quite cured in time," slowly uttered Ovelman.

"A fitting climax!" laughed Marjean, her eyes flashing.

"At any rate, it is one which will assuredly come to pass unless you show signs of improvement, and that very shortly. If not crazy, you are worse. That man is not Kyrie Dando—"

"You recognized him yourself—"

"Deceived by your folly, I at first thought I did, but I know better now. He denied you flatly enough."

"Because he thought me false to him, in his hour of need. He believed that I wrote the note which you sent him—"

"There was no note!" sharply interposed Ovelman. "That was only the forlorn hope which he concocted with the aid of his lawyer, but which he was afraid to trust to, when he saw what skillful experts in handwriting we had to sift his story. That was decided at the trial."

"There was a note, purporting to be written by me, signed with my name. I never wrote it. God forgive me if I wrong you in the belief, but I more than suspect that it was your work! You gave him no chance to see me and learn the truth, for you hurried me off to Washington, on the very morning the check was sent him—"

"Called by a telegram which would admit of no delay."

"So you said. That, too, was a forgery, no doubt," was the icy cold retort. "Kyrie told me all that terrible day when I visited him in prison. He believed that note written by me, even as it was signed with my name, and a close imitation of my handwriting in the body of the note. When I was forced upon the witness stand, I told what I believed to be the truth, though every word I uttered cut me to the very heart. He believed that I was deliberately perjury myself, glad of the chance to free myself from one who was now a beggar. He told me as much in plain words, and refusing to listen to my defense, he poured his curses upon my head until I fell to the stone floor of his cell, senseless!"

"Yet you still cling to the foolish idea of his innocence—you are still infatuated with the convicted forger!"

"Ay! because I know that he is innocent!" was the impetuous reply. "And the time will come when he will believe in my innocence, too—when all will be made clear between us, and the past forgotten—"

"You forget what he told you about his charming wife and his three little ones!" sneered Ovelman.

It was a bitter blow, and the poor woman drooped before it as the tender plant wilts beneath the glare of the sun after a frosty night. Without one pang of pity, Arthur Ovelman pressed his advantage, as he deemed it.

"Enough of this nonsense. Promise me that you will not leave this building—that you will make no

attempt to see this fellow again, until we have left Rocky Bar—that you will refuse to speak to him, should he try to force himself upon your acquaintance, or I'll lock you up as one might a perverse child who don't know what is best for its welfare!"

Marjean lifted her head with a return of her old spirit.

"I will not promise. If I did, it would only be to break it. I will never leave this place until Kyrie Dando goes. I will seek him until all is made clear—"

"Take care!" and Arthur Ovelman rose from his chair, his features convulsed with fury, a wicked light in his eyes. "If you are wise, you'll not crowd me too hard!"

As though fearful of trusting himself further, he left the room, locking the door behind him and removing the key.

With open door he sat in his room opposite, in the dark, thinking, brooding deeply. And from thence he saw Dan Brown and Nor' West Nick enter the chamber belonging to the Denver detective. A silent but none the less bitter curse broke from his heart as he saw that the man whom he had hunted almost to death, had once more broken through the toils, and as he heard the key turned in the lock, he stole forward in the darkness, and kneeling there with his ear to the key-hole, he heard the long story told by Nor' West Nick. Many a swift change swept over his pale face as he listened, but had there been less of darkness, it might have been seen that he, as well as Dan Brown, believed that Nor' West Nick had related his own experience, instead of that of his brother, as he claimed.

Little sleep Arthur Ovelman obtained that night, yet he was afoot early in the morning. With his own hands he carried Marjean her breakfast, but not a word passed between them, and when he went away, the key was once more turned in the lock.

As is the case in all purely mining towns, Rocky Bar was ever the most lively on Sundays, and though not many of "the boys" had sought their couches on the night just passed, preferring to talk over the strange and exciting scenes they had witnessed, Arthur Ovelman found the main street well crowded when he left the Arlington, to carry out the black plot his busy brain had elaborated during those dark, silent hours.

He was not long in seeing that there was a growing feeling against Nor' West Nick, thanks mainly to the talk of several cowboys, who seemed to feel in duty bound to stand up for their own class, even though death had canceled all.

The evil light deepened in his eyes as he saw how favorably matters were working for his scheme, and he struck while the iron was hot.

Though gold was his god, he could be lavish when his interests demanded an open hand, and entering one of the saloons before which the largest crowd was gathered, he held a brief and whispered conversation with the barkeeper, who was also the owner of the establishment. A handful of gold was exchanged, and then a surprise was sprung upon the crowd.

"Gents!" cried the fellow, emerging from his saloon, with a keg of whisky in his arms. "Tention here! Free drinks for all that's thirsty! Roll up an' take your pizen!"

In amazement the crowd stared at him. With the reputation of one who could pinch a quarter until the claws of the eagle on one side scratched the face of the goddess of liberty on the other, such generosity was astounding.

"Tain't 'cause the mice is got into it, fer Shang 'd skim them out an' save the hides to patch his britches!" one of the most audacious cried, with a laugh.

"Jest as good licker as you ever tucked under your belt at somebody else's treat!" snapped the barkeeper, flushing hotly. "I said gents, didn't I? That lets you out, Short and Dirty! Fer the rest—'tain't my treat. That's a high-toned gent as wants to make a little speech, an' to keep you from gittin' too dry, he trots out this pizen. Take it or leave it, jest as you durn please. I've got the ducats fer it, an' that's as fur as my interests goes."

Knocking in the head of the keg, and hanging on the edge a small tin cup, he beat a retreat, none too soon to avoid the rush of the crowd, laughing, cheering and calling to their more distant comrades to come and make hay while the sun shone.

While they were thus occupied, Arthur Ovelman helped the saloon-keeper place a box just outside the door, and as the quickly emptied keg was tossed high into the air, he cried:

"Gentlemen, a few words with you, if you please!"

Instantly the tumult was checked, and all eyes turned with interest upon the speaker. A few of those present recognized him, and swiftly passed the information to their fellows, feeling sure that the proposed speech would treat of Nor' West Nick, the man whose name was on every tongue.

"I will not detain you long," added Ovelman, speaking rapidly, but with distinctness. "The subject is a peculiarly painful one to me, but a sense of justice compels me to make some explanation of the very painful scene which I and mine took part in last evening."

"That unfortunate lady is my only child. Once she was the joy and pride of my household, but now—she is but little better than a maniac! And she was made thus by the devilish influence of that blot on humanity—the three-fold murderer of last night—the scoundrel who calls himself Nor' West Nick!"

As though overcome with the intensity of his feelings, the voice of the speaker died away into a husky groan, and his white-crowned head drooped upon his breast.

A mutter of sympathy came from the half-drunk crowd, which was rapidly deepening to an ominous roar, when Arthur Ovelman suddenly recovered his composure, and with uplifted hand checked their growing rage.

"Hear me through, gentlemen, before you decide for or against me. I am only a stranger here, and for all you know, may be playing upon your feelings with a view to my own ends. Let me finish, then inspect my proofs, all of you, or to save time, by a committee selected by yourselves."

"Years ago I took that man into the bosom of my family, and treated him as my own son. I did all I could to make him rich and respected. He won the

love of my only daughter, and they were engaged to be married. This with my cordial consent, for I loved him too, and believed him the very soul of honor. But the time came when my eyes were opened to the sad truth, and I came to know him in his true colors—as a liar, a gambler, a thief and a debauchee!

"What could I do, as a loving father, proud of his child, but still prouder of the unstained and untarnished name which had been handed down to me by my fathers? Just what any honorable man among you would have done, under like circumstances, and with the same overwhelming proof which crowded upon me. I told him all that I had discovered, and bade him begone."

"The very next day a check signed with my name, was presented at my banker's, and paid. It was a forgery, and that night the forger was arrested—the man who now calls himself Nor' West Nick!"

"The trial came on, and the crime was proven in every detail. Then, as a last, desperate resort, he capped the climax of his satanic infamy, by declaring that the check was given to him by my daughter, on learning that I had disowned him and cast him adrift. He had her called to the witness stand, and when, being upon her solemn oath, the poor child was forced to deny his statement, he turned upon her like a demon and heaped the foulest curses upon her innocent head. She sunk down in a swoon, and from that moment to this, her poor brain has been turned—yet through it all, she loves him, faithful to the demon who had ruined her fair young life!"

Again the impassioned speaker broke down, covering his face with his hands, his frame quivering as though in the effort to smother the sobs which were still distinctly audible.

A rare actor did Arthur Ovelman prove himself that day!

He had said enough—more than enough. Inflamed with bad whisky, excited by the wild scenes and bloodshed of the past night, wrought up by the bitter speeches of the cowboys, the steadily growing mob was ripe for mischief, and in Nor' West Nick they fancied they saw the very victim they needed.

The sullen muttering rose to a roar that once heard can never be forgotten—the cry for human blood!

"Hang him—lynch the dirty cuss that treated the purty lady like a dog—burn him—whar is he—whar is the p'izen critter as calls hisself Nor' West Nick?"

Such were the words which burst from the mob, growing wilder and more fierce with the passage of each moment.

And then, clear and defiant came the answer: "Here I am, gentlemen! What do you want of Nor' West Nick?"

Instantly there fell a hush over the madly yelling mob, as this bold response smote upon their ears, and all eyes were turned upon the speaker—Nor' West Nick himself, mounted, a cocked revolver in either hand, a cold, chilling smile upon his reckless, dare-devil face as he confronted them!

CHAPTER XIII. THE HOT BOILS OVER.

ONE man against a hundred, nine-tenths of whom have just declared for his death at the top of their voices—but that man, playing a lone hand, was Nor' West Nick!

Looking very different now from when they had seen him last, fresh from that frightful ride Mazyra-fashion over the desert on the back of the mad Texan. Then with his garments whip-tattered and soiled, now looking as though he had just stepped from the hands of some fashionable tailor. Mingled blood and dust upon his face in layers and streaks, last night. Now, the only sign of what he had passed through was the red streak across his face, the track of the bullet which had been calculated by Dick Wheeler to end the duel in his favor.

A mocking smile curled the lip of the border detective as he noted the sudden silence which fell upon the howling mob at his bold challenge. The muzzles of his revolvers were suffered to fall back until they rested lightly upon his shoulders, his arms hanging at careless ease—but it was a carelessness more apparent than real. In case of need, the least possible movement would bring those glittering weapons into position ready for hot and swift work.

"Did I not hear somebody gently breathe the name of Nor' West Nick, but a moment since?" he asked, his voice sounding soft and gentle, yet containing a sting sharp as that of a rattlesnake's tooth. "Methought I did, yet I must have been mistaken, or else you are the most modest lot of gentlemen it has been my fortune to meet for this many a day!"

Soft and musical as that of a child, came his low laugh, yet a blow in the face could not have stung more sharply.

A low muttering ran through the crowd, telling plain enough that they were ripe for mischief, if they only had a leader—that prime essential, deprived of which a mob is actually less dangerous than a single resolute man.

Arthur Ovelman saw this, and saw, too, as their eyes were turned instinctively toward him, that they looked to him for the first move—that without he lent them the needed impetus, even now his cunningly wrought up scheme might fail.

Though neither physically nor morally a brave man, he felt that the world was not large enough for them both to live in, and though a tremor of fear crept over his frame as he anticipated a pistol-shot from the man whom—as he now firmly believed—he had so terribly wronged in the days gone by, he summoned his courage and cried:

"It was my voice you heard, Kyrle Dando, and I was giving these gentlemen a bit of your life history—forged, escaped convict—deny the charge if you dare!"

There was a slight movement of one armed hand, and the capitalist ducked his head with a celerity that told how thoroughly he was awake to a sense of his danger, but no shot was fired. Instead, Nor' West Nick laughed sarcastically at the terrified movement, then retorting:

"Cannot you give me a more distinctive title, old gentleman? Half of those fellows around you are convicts, who have either served out their time or have given the authorities leg-bail. Call me gentleman, or honest fellow, if you want to awaken a spirit of antagonism in your audience!"

There was a movement in the crowd as these cut-

ting words fell upon their ears, but it was one expressive of stupid amazement at the supreme audacity which this man displayed. They could not understand it. That smooth, mocking voice stunned them. Each word was like a blow in the face from a mail-clad hand, and not one among them all knew what defense to attempt. They suspected a trap of some sort. Surely no one man, unless heavily backed, would dare speak in that manner!

Arthur Ovelman alone came near the truth, but he dare not attempt to draw back now. One of the twain must go down forever, and calling up all his spirit, he cried:

"There's yet another title which you forget, most conveniently for yourself—*Captain Slyboots*—"

A mocking, reckless laugh cut him short.

"So—that's your game, is it? Well, I'll meet you and your precious crowd of heelers half-way—and as the first move, I'll mark you so that I'll have no difficulty in recognizing you the next time we meet!"

Even as he spoke, Nor' West Nick lunged forward one revolver, discharging it before Arthur Ovelman could divine his intention or dodge out of danger.

A yell of mingled fear, rage and pain burst from the lips of the capitalist as he clapped one hand to the side of his head, for the surely aimed bullet had cut away the lobe of his right ear, clean as though a knife had been used.

Quick as a flash of lightning Nor' West Nick covered the surging crowd with his pistols, his blue eyes all afire, his white teeth gleaming beneath his mustaches as he cried:

"Any other two-legged Maverick in this crowd that wants marking? Don't be backward about coming forward, gentlemen! I've got my hand in now, and would just as soon clean out the whole gang as not—a little rather, in fact."

Wild with rage, forgetting his bodily fears, fairly foaming at the mouth, Arthur Ovelman jumped up and down on his frail pedestal, one hand clasp his mutilated ear, yelling:

"It's Captain Slyboots! Kill him! One thousand dollars for his head, dead or alive!"

That was all the crowd needed. With wild cries, their weapons flashed out, and the air was rent with the discharge of pistols. A mad rush was made toward the daring detective.

But that head-money was not to be so easily won. From the first Nor' West Nick knew that it must come to this sooner or later, and he was prepared for the crisis.

A touch of his armed heel sent the good horse plunging forward, straight into the midst of the mob. It was a reckless and apparently suicidal act, but Nor' West Nick knew what he was doing. This was not the first time he had encountered an angry mob, and the result fully justified his course of action.

Wild with rage, blind with passion, acting without any acknowledged leader, the mob was all confusion, more dangerous to their own members than the man they sought to slay, and this confusion was redoubled by the swift plunging of the well-trained horse, whose heels were lashing out, whose white teeth were snapping viciously, while in swift succession the pistols of Nor' West Nick emptied their chambers, each bullet finding its mark as surely as though the border detective was practicing at a target, with not a breath of danger in the air.

Thus for a few moments only, then the raging mob was cut fairly in twain, and the daring rider burst through, still with that mocking smile upon his lips, still uttering that taunting laugh, apparently untouched, unharmed.

"Hold!" cried a loud, commanding voice. "The man that dares touch him strikes at me as well!" and Dan Brown came running down the street at full speed.

But he was too late. A blaze of fire burst from the crowd as they realized the partial escape of their destined victim, and with an almost human scream of agony, the good horse reared up, pawing the air wildly, then plunged forward, falling in a heap, its body riddled with the lead intended for its rider.

With cat-like activity Nor' West Nick sprang clear of the dying horse, alighting fairly upon his feet, then swiftly wheeled and confronted his enemies, a fresh pair of revolvers flashing in his hands.

Right and left he worked the deadly weapons, using one hand as readily and as surely as the other, and with yells and curses of pain, the foremost of the gang reeled and fell back, unable to face that storm of lead.

A witness of all this was Dan Brown, and though he felt that he had arrived upon the scene too late to effect his purpose, he did not falter nor pause to consider what might be the consequences to himself.

Straight through the mad crowd he forced his way, using his revolver freely, not to kill, but to knock aside those who barred his way in their blind excitement, the heavy, gold-bound butt thumping head after head in a most impartial manner, sending their owners reeling aside, or dropping them to their knees, before they could tell what was up.

Through the crowd he fought his way, and then, as Nor' West Nick fired his last shot, he leaped to his side, crying:

"Shoulder to shoulder, mate! If we can't face down that gang of howling wild beasts, we'll make it interesting for them while the circus lasts, anyway!"

A short, hard laugh broke from the border detective.

"There's enough for us both, I reckon, even if it isn't exactly what you might call pie!"

"Hold hard, men!" shouted Dan Brown, raising one hand. "If you want fight, you shall have it, red-hot—but listen to me while I speak one word, first. I ask it as a fellow-citizen of Rocky Bar—in the name of common justice."

Never before was the power and influence of a single man more strikingly exemplified than on the present occasion.

Instantly the wild, howling cry for blood was hushed, leveled weapons were lowered, nerves and muscles tightly strung for the fierce charge which should crush the bold man who had so fearlessly defied and taunted them down to death, were suffered to relax, and all eyes were turned upon the speaker.

Every man present knew and respected Dan Brown, who had won his way into their good graces by his friendly manner, undoubted courage and

open-handed generosity. To no other man in Rocky Bar would they have listened then, with their wounds smarting, with the man who had inflicted them standing almost within arm's length, mocking them with his smile.

"A hundred of you upon one man—and he a stranger! For shame, men of Rocky Bar!" cried Brown, his eyes aglow, his voice ringing with scorn and indignation.

"It's that dirty cuss, Cap'n Slyboots!" doggedly returned one of the foremost miners, his right arm dangling helplessly at his side, the bone broken by one of the shots fired by Nor' West Nick, but who held a pistol in his left hand.

"Whoever told you that, *lie*, Mark Davis," bluntly retorted Dan Brown. "You all know me. You should know whether or not my word is to be depended upon. I tell you now that this gentleman is no more Captain Slyboots than I am. He is the man you have all heard of—and heard nothing to his discredit either—Nor' West Nick, the celebrated detective. I answer for him with my life, if needs be."

"That old cuss told us he was Cap'n Slyboots, an' offered a thousan' scads fer his head, dead or alive—"

"He lied in his throat then!" was the sharp reply.

"Mebbe he did—'course he did, ef you say so," said Davis, grimly. "Your word is good as gold with any of us boys, an' what you tell us we jest swaller without salt or winkin'. But that ain't all. The p'izen cuss hes bit hard—"

"In self-defense—and you should be the last man to blame him for that, Mark Davis."

"All the same, he's got to pay fer what he's done," doggedly. "Ef you're wise, you'll pull out an' let him hoe his own row. Tain't your quarrel. Then what makes you stick in?"

"Because I call myself a white man, and no true man could stand by and see a hundred stout fellows jump a single man, without chipping in," was the smiling response—but it was a smile that meant danger, as those who knew him best could tell only too plainly.

Mark Davis scratched his head with the blackened muzzle of his revolver, seemingly puzzled what to do or say.

Just then a diversion was effected by a voice from the rear of the crowd, crying out, warningly:

"Too darn much talk! Don't you see that the blamed collywobbus is takin' 'vantage of it to load up his popguns?"

"Too late, my gay and festive friend!" cried Nor' West Nick, with a light nod of his head toward the shaggy face of the speaker, none other than Dave Nichols, the tall claimant of his title. "I'm ready for business once more, Mr. Brown, and I join my appeal to that of my friend Davis. While I fully appreciate your kindness, and will be delighted to return the compliment, should you ever find yourself in a like box, I reckon I can hoe my own row through this little patch. If you will just step aside and let us have it out—"

"Take him at his word, boss!" eagerly cried Davis. "We don't want to hurt you, none o' us, but ef you stan' in the way, it's mighty like you'll git your corns trod on, too!"

"Thank you for your good will, Davis," was the cool response. "I have passed my word that this gentleman is innocent of the charge brought against him—"

"You can't talk out the wounds he's give us!" doggedly.

"Thank your stars that it is no worse," laughed Nor' West Nick. "Then I was only shooting for amusement; if I am crowded again, I'll shoot for blood!"

"Heap big talk me!" squealed a voice from the crowd, and Nickerson ducked down, as though expecting a shot in reply.

A short, hard laugh broke from the lips of Nor' West Nick.

"You doubt my words? Look yonder!" and he pointed upward to where a buzzard was slowly circling through the ether, far above their heads.

Instinctively all eyes were turned upward, and instantly the border detective's pistol exploded. There was a sudden flapping of the wings which had been held stationary as the obscene bird floated through the air; then the body turned over, and the buzzard came whirling downward, the partially open wings causing it to describe a spiral until it struck the ground with a thump.

"Gentlemen," cried Nor' West Nick, with a cold smile. "To prove that I have only been playing with you—only winging you to keep you from killing me, as you killed my good horse—I make this proposition: If that bird hasn't got its throat cut by my bullet, I'll deliver up my arms, and surrender to you without striking another blow for my life!"

There was a rush for the buzzard, but Nickerson was the one to reach it first, and a yell of wonder broke from his lips as he held the carcass up to public view.

"Throat cut, or I'll forget the buzzard part an' eat it fer plain turkey!" he shouted. "Good-day, gents! I've got a 'portant 'gagement which I hed ferget all about ontel jest now. You kin hev my share o' the pie! I ain't a gully-whompin' hog! Never did hanter after pie, nohow! Good-day—while I kin say it!" and dropping the dead fowl, the fat claimant strode away as though important business called him.

"Quick!" muttered Dan Brown, while the volatile crowd had their attention momentarily diverted by the remarkable shot and its results. "Just over there is my office. They'll not be satisfied with what they've got, but will come hotter than ever. If we can get there first, we may be able to stand them off until their blood cools enough to listen to reason. Now's our chance—come!"

The distance was short, hardly fifty yards from where the two men then stood. The building was small, of one story, bearing across its front the name of the mine, Jealous Girl, while below it was the name of the Denver detective. A frail fort, at best, but it was infinitely better than to remain where they were, in the open, liable to be surrounded at any moment, when a treacherous shot while their attention was called in the opposite direction, could forever end the dispute.

Still facing the crowd, but retreating rapidly, the two men had covered rather more than half the distance which divided them from the building, when

a sharp cry of warning broke from the lips of Arthur Ovelman.

"Look! they're running away! After them! I double the reward! Two thousand dollars for his head!"

The sentence was never concluded. Nor' West Nick caught the excited speech and recognized the one who uttered them. A wicked light flashed into his eyes, and before Dan Brown suspected his intention, he paused and threw up his right arm.

Arthur Ovelman saw the motion and read its meaning aright, for a look of terror came over his inflamed countenance, then he turned pale as a ghost as he tried to escape.

But it was not to be. The pistol exploded, and throwing up his arms, the capitalist fell from the box, in a lifeless heap!

CHAPTER XIV.

PROVING AN ALIBI.

The easily-swayed crowd turned from their contemplation of the cut-throat buzzard as the angry cries of Arthur Ovelman warned them of how they were being outwitted, and for a brief space it seemed as though they were about to dash after the two men and overpower them by the mere weight of numbers. But as the border detective raised his pistol, every man in the crowd faltered, then shrunk back as the weapon exploded, for the marvelous shot which they had so recently witnessed told them that Nor' West Nick held the lives of a full dozen men at his fingers' end.

The fall of Arthur Ovelman drew a low, grating, curse from the lips of Dan Brown, for he believed the act fatal in more senses than one.

"That settles it!" he muttered, clinching his teeth, but still threatening the irresolute mob with his revolvers as he retreated a little more hastily. "We might have bluffed them off, so long as no one had been killed, but now that faint chance is gone. Well, we can fight it out, anyway!"

A careless laugh from Nor' West Nick as they reached the door of the little office, where they stood at bay, facing the mob with their weapons, two men against a hundred, with the ranks of their enemies being continually reinforced.

"You mean that old white-headed coon? He's all right! He had so much lip that I thought it best to lay him on the shelf for a bit, just to give the rest a chance. You'll see him pop up in a minute or two, livelier than ever. I only creased the rascal."

"You are sure?" hastily demanded Dan Brown.

"Dead sure! I never make mistakes with a revolver of my own choice," was the confident response.

"Then it may not be as bad as I feared—hold, gentlemen!" the last word being addressed sharply to the mob, which had apparently recovered from its irresolution, and was once more showing a threatening front. "For my sake as well as your own, I entreat you to pause and reflect upon what you are about to do, before it is forever too late."

"Which it's that already!" doggedly retorted Mark Davis, unsteady on his legs through loss of blood from his bullet-broken arm. "Life fer life, the good book says, an' though I don't reckon we're none too pious ourselves, we ain't sech p'izen heathen as to go back on that!"

"I see some scratches among you, but no dead men—"

"Mebbe you ain't overly anxious fer to see 'em," with a short, dry laugh. "Didn't he jest keel over the old gent?"

"Can you blame him for that, even granting that his shot was fatal—which I deny? Who started all this row? Who has urged you on to commit murder? Who offered you money to pay for the heart's blood of an innocent man—of one whom he *knew* was innocent? That same old gentleman, who is no more dead than you or I—unless, indeed, he has died of fright at hearing a bullet whistle about his ears!"

"Crumple me up fer a dish-rag to wipe the baby's nose with ef it ain't the gospel truth!" cried the voice of Norton Weston Nickerson. "Ha'r parted in the middle by a bullet, straighter than ever a gal could do it when 'specting a visit from her lovier! Durn such a lead-slinger as that! Now I *will* pucker!"

"Good-by, my lovier, good-by!" What's a hole big enough fer a gentleman o' my size to crawl into an' lay low ontel this spell o' onhealthy weather cl'ars up?"

Once more the fat claimant had effected a valuable diversion, and as the unstable crowd once more showed signs of indecision, Dan Brown struck swift and sure.

"You hear that, gentlemen? And remember it is the evidence given by one who can have neither love nor friendly feeling toward this gentleman, who so fully unmasked those base pretenders, only last evening. Arthur Ovelman is not dead, though if he were, there is not an unprejudiced jury in all the land who would not pronounce it justifiable homicide on the part of Nor' West Nick!"

Mark Davis uttered an ugly growl, but he was turning faint and sick from the excessive loss of blood from his wound, and though a braver man never drew the breath of life, growing weakness was rapidly taking all the fight out of him.

When the first mad rush of a mob is checked, when they pause for deliberation, induced thereto by fear or argument, the worst of the danger is past, and none knew this better than Dan Brown. It is blind, unreasoning lust for blood that is most to be dreaded. Danger yet remains, it is true, but only such as a bold, cool-witted man can master if he but plays his hand for all it is worth.

"Ef it's dead men you're axin' fer, thar's the three pore boys which we planted only this mornin'!" cried one of the cowboys, sharply. "White an' squar' they was, too, as ever you'll find. Who rounded them up an' sent 'em over the range?"

"I did!" cried Nor' West Nick, his blue eyes flashing fire, as he showed signs of anger for the first time since uttering that bold response to the query of Arthur Ovelman. "I killed them, and I am only sorry that I have it not in my power to bring them back to life again—"

"You can't beg off that-a-way—"

"Beg off nothing!" interrupted Nor' West Nick, with a hard, ugly laugh. "I wish I could bring them back to life again, so that I could kill them once more, and in doing so, make them suffer one tithe the torture they inflicted upon me! That is what I meant—make the most of it!"

Dan Brown frowned, for he saw that a portion of his good work had been undone by the reckless, impassioned speech of the man he was trying to save, at the risk of his own life. Though Mark Davis was forced to withdraw, reeling as he went, the few cowboys were pressing to the front, with the air of men who meant business.

"Why does he wish that?" demanded the Denver detective, earnestly. "Why does his hatred follow men who are now in the grave? Let me tell you—I'll make it as short as I can."

"A stranger, a traveler who had lost his way in seeking to reach Rocky Bar, this gentleman, whom I am proud to call my friend, chanced upon the camp of those three men, and paused to inquire his way. They promised to direct him—to show him the way, since they were coming here themselves. They kept their promise—but how?"

"Without a word of warning, without giving him the slightest chance to defend himself, they lassoed him from behind, bound him upon the back of a wild bull, and then chased him the full ten miles, lashing him like a hound until his garments were cut to ribbons, until there was scarcely a spot on his body as big as a silver dollar but what it held a red welt raised by their whips. I know, because I helped to dress his wounds."

"You know, better than I can tell you, how he came into Rocky Bar. Many of you were eye-witnesses, and those who were not have been told the story, no doubt, and given all the particulars. You know what followed. There was a fight, and three men were killed. While sorry for their fate, I can't say that it was undeserved—indeed, they were treated better than their crime deserved."

"They treated an innocent man worse than any felon should be treated. He proved his innocence, and then dared them to meet him in a fair fight. Fair it was on his side, as all of you can testify—the less said about his antagonists the better, since they have gone to their last account."

"Now, men of Rocky Bar! Since when has it been adjudged a capital crime for one man to kill another in a fair, regularly-conducted duel? Since when—"

"The boys tuck him to be that p'izen critter, Cap'n Slyboots, who robbed them of thar hard-won property," doggedly interposed the cowboy. "They know'd him to be the head man of those who jumped them, that night—"

"On that night he was in Denver, as I am willing to take oath. He holds a commission, signed by Governor Tabor, dated the day following that, and another one from—"

"All the same, it don't prove that he ain't what the boys said. Mebbe they was wrong about his bein' the one as run off their stock, but fer all that he kin turn out Cap'n Slyboots!"

"Hold!" cried Nor' West Nick, until now a careless and seemingly little interested observer of the dispute on which his life hinged, but now springing into life and action as the rapid clatter of iron-shod hoofs were heard, and a horseman came dashing around the corner, riding at speed toward the office.

"Keep your distance, my fine fellow—"

"He's a friend!" cried Dan Brown, recognizing the foreman of the Jealous Girl in the wild rider.

"What's up now, Tim?"

"The very devil to pay!" hastily responded the rider, his breath coming short and broken, showing how hard he had ridden. "Captain Slyboots and his gang jumped us, last night, and just knocked things west-end-and-crooked!"

"You hear that, gentlemen?" demanded Dan Brown, turning to the greedily listening crowd, and seeming to forget his own losses in his desire to serve one whom he called friend. "A man can't be in two places at once. I can swear that Nor' West Nick was with me until long after midnight. You know how far the Jealous Girl is situated from Rocky Bar. Now, Tim, when did the road-agents make their attack?"

"Nigh two o'clock—there or thereabouts!" was the reply, given without the slightest hesitation. "Good enough!" and there was a ring of triumph in the tones of the Denver detective. "Dismount and come in, Toplift. I'll listen to your report later. Just now—gentlemen!" and he once more addressed the crowd. "There's no use in wasting more words. I have proven Nor' West Nick's innocence of all the charges which have been brought against him."

"What 'bout the talk the old gent give us?" persisted the cowboy. "Durn a critter that'll treat a lady that-a-way!"

"Don't you go to throwing stones too reckless, Tom Duncan, or some of them may fall back on your own head. They say that this climate is a much more healthful one than Wyoming."

"It's all a durned lie!" growled the cowboy, hastily.

"What? About the climate?" and Dan Brown laughed softly. "Well, you should know, for you came from that region."

There was a hidden sting in his words, judging from the manner in which the cowboy turned and slunk away, and for a third time the crowd found itself without a leader.

"Whatever may have happened back in the old States, we have nothing to do with here. If there is any difficulty between Nor' West Nick and Arthur Ovelman, let them settle it between themselves as best they can. I have only this to say:

"Nor' West Nick is my friend. The man who strikes a blow at him, also strikes at me, and I will resent it even more quickly. But that in your pipe and smoke it!"

"Gentlemen," said Nor' West Nick, speaking up. "While very grateful to Mr. Brown for all the trouble he is taking on my account, I hardly think it necessary. I have always been able to hoe my own row, through life, and I always expect to. You crowded me, and some of you got hurt as was to be expected. Still, if there are any one, two or three men among you who think that I have misused them in any manner, I will take all the pleasure in life in proving to them their mistake, when, where and how he or they elect. Put up or shut up!"

There was an ugly muttering among the crowd at this bold, almost insolent defiance, which told plainly enough that Nor' West Nick had not bettered his case much, but no one stepped forward to accept the pointed challenge. They had seen too much of his personal prowess to care about meeting him on anything like even terms.

"Don't crowd them too far, my friend," said Dan Brown, in a whisper. "They are simmering down now, but a breath too hot may set the pot to boiling over again, and then there'll be a fair prospect for scalded fingers all 'round the board."

"Oh, I'll be as meek and modest as a maiden with her first beau," laughed the border detective, lightly.

"Keep out of their sight for a little while, and it will all come right. If you like, I'll see you out of town—"

"Thanks," said Nor' West Nick, raising his voice so that the crowd could hear his words. "I appreciate the kindness of your offer, but I cannot accept it. I never yet ran away from danger, and I am too old to begin now. I like the looks of Rocky Bar—what I have seen of it—and here I mean to stay until I have concluded the work which brought me into these parts."

"You hear gentlemen? Pressing business calls me away from town, just now, but when that is done, I will return, and if any unmerited harm befalls this gentleman, my friend, during my absence, I solemnly swear that I will call every man to a strict account for his action. You know me, by this time."

Dan Brown spoke slowly and with an emphasis that could not be mistaken. Instead of being offended by his plain talk, a cheer arose from the crowd, for they could appreciate fidelity to a friend through thick and thin, like this.

"I'm sorry that I must leave you now," added the Denver detective, clasping the hand which Nor' West Nick extended. "You heard what Toplift said about the mine—"

"If I can be of any service, command me."

"Thanks! I may ask your help, but not now. Toplift says the gang was off before he dared make a break. I can only investigate the affair to-day, and see what is best to do."

The clasped hands parted, and Nor' West Nick, seeing that Dan Brown preferred to hear the report of his foreman alone, turned away from the office, strolling leisurely down the street, passing through the lane which the slowly dissolving crowd made for him, a careless smile upon his handsome countenance, showing not the slightest trace of fear, though only a brief space before, these men were thirsting for his blood.

It was a superb exhibition of nerve, as all admitted.

CHAPTER XV.

TWO GOOD SAMARITANS.

It was neither from fright at hearing the angry whistling of lead, as Dan Brown maliciously suggested, nor from a desire to escape the consequences of the storm he had called up, that caused Arthur Ovelman to fling up his arms and fall headlong from his frail pedestal. For the time being he was little better than a dead man. True to a hair's breadth, the bullet discharged by Nor' West Nick glanced along the top of his skull, cutting through the scalp, and knocking him senseless, though the wound itself was not a dangerous one.

How long an interval passed thus he had no means of knowing, but when his consciousness returned he found himself in an altogether different situation. At first there was only a black, confused blur before his eyes, and he caught himself vaguely wondering if the day had passed and the night succeeded since that moment of terror and the stunning shock which so swiftly followed.

He tried to rise to his feet, but in vain. There was a curiously hampered feeling about his limbs as he tried to use them, not unlike that peculiar sensation which one sometimes experiences in a nightmare dream.

"Don't ye do it, boss!" came a husky whisper from out the gloom. "Fer the love o' yer life, don't ye make sound enough to wake a weasel, ef ye whispered it in its very ears! Ef ye do, we'll all go to glory together, jest a-whoopin'!"

Like some grim phantom of the night, one of the deeper shadows resolved itself into the face of a human creature, hanging over Arthur Ovelman with a horrible grimace. The little eyes glowed like those of a cat in the darkness. The ends of a monstrous pair of mustaches twirled and twisted like the flexible feelers of a huge catfish.

"It's the gospel truth he's givin' ye, old gentleman," supplemented a hissing voice from the opposite side, equally guarded in its tones. "Truth, straight as a string; but ef it hain't tuck the skin clean off o' his thrapple then I knuckle under fer a don't-know-a-durn."

"Who are you? Where am I?" gasped the bewildered capitalist. "What has happened? I don't understand—"

"The comick has struck the airth, knocked Rocky Bar west-end-an'-crooked!" croaked the first voice. "We're jest a-hangin' on to the ragged aidge o' creation by the grip o' our eyebrows. Wink afore we give the word, an' you take a flyin' trip to never-come-back-ag'in in a holy minnit!"

"Don't ye mind *him*, boss," uttered the second speaker, and the bewildered capitalist could just manage to make out the dim shape of a human face peering down into his own. "Ef the critter should ever try to talk common sense, it'd choke him so quick it'd make your head swim to look on!"

"Who did the job?" swiftly came the retort. "Who saved him from grim death an' massacreation?"

"Who but *me*—Nor' West Nick—"

"Look-a-ye—I licked you once fer takin' my name in vain, an' durned ef I don't do it ag'in, ye drawed-out angle-worm o' p'izen cussedness, unless ye keep closer to the chalk-line o' truthfulness—now you hear *me* preach!"

"You couldn't whip one side of a sick kitten, unless you ketched it asleep, an' hed somebody to help ye— No ye *don't*!"

There came the sharp click of a pistol being cocked, and after a moment's silence, the fat claimant spoke, in a conciliatory tone:

"Business afore fun, pard. We kin fight when thar ain't nothin' of more 'portance on hand. How does that hit ye?"

"Don't come no more o' that cussed foolishin', then," was the surly response.

During this bit of by-play, the wits of Arthur Ovelman were rapidly returning to his aid, and though the whole affair was still enveloped in mys-

tery, he began to realize that he was in danger—that his hands and feet were fast bound.

Summoning all his strength, he strove to burst his bonds, but in vain. And that action seemed to recall the growling fellows to their senses.

"Keep quiet, unless you want the enemy to come down onto you in a heap!" warningly muttered one of the men, while a heavy hand ran over his person.

"What do you mean?" demanded Ovelman. "Why have you tied me up after this fashion? What have I done?"

"Take it cool an' easy, fer jest a minnit, an' mebbe you kin see through the tangle. I'll strike a light, so we kin see how to talk without gittin' all tangled up."

There came the sputtering of a match, and then a dim light made itself visible, and fishing a small fragment of a candle from his pocket, Dave Nichols lit it with a match.

"Tain't as big as the moon, nura light as the sun, but I reckon it'll hev to serve us fer now," uttered his husky whisper as he stuck the candle-end on a splinter, then ran this into a crack in the wall above the head of the captive.

Eagerly Arthur Ovelman used his eyes, his heart sinking still lower within him as he recognized the two men who apparently held him wholly in their power. As the voices had first told him, they were the rival claimants who had played such a prominent part in the strange events of the past night, David Nichols and Norton Weston Nickerson, who seemed to have become allies and pooled their issues for this occasion. It could scarcely be for any good purpose.

He was not left long to his thoughts. Creeping closer, one on each side, the fellows touched their lips as they cast wild, fearful glances around them.

"Pears like I hearn a footstep creepin', mate!"

"An' I kin smell powder an' cold lead, with a taste o' twisted hemp mixed up with it!" muttered the other worthy.

"We mought git cl'ar by stealin' away an' usin' our legs mighty peart, mate, but we won't do that, will we?"

"An' leave him ahind fer them to string up ag'in?" indignantly hissed the other. "I can't say fer you, but this chicken sticks it out ontel the last keerd is played, even though I knowed that it'd be my last deal! When I go back on a feller bein' in distress, you jest tell me of it, won't ye?"

"That's the ticket! We saved him this fur, an' we'll pull him through, right eend up, or we'll dance the same sort o' jig alongside the old gent. Chirk up, boss! Ef you hev got to make a die of it, this trip, you'll hev the satisfaction o' crossin' the divide in the best o' good comp'ny, ef I do say it which hedn't order!"

Arthur Ovelman scanned the speakers as well as he was able by the dim light of the candle. He saw that they were muffled and bandaged about the faces, that blood-stained bits of cloth were wound around their arms, while their clothing seemed to have been half torn off them.

A half laugh broke from the lips of Nickerson.

"They did it—them cusses as turned to an' was goin' to hang you fer gittin' 'em into the squabble with that pizen critter which goes around ridin' wild bulls, an' takin' the good names of honest gents away from 'em—"

"Tain't only our clothes, nuther, that suffered," broke in Nichols, with a surly note. "I've got flits an' slashes an' bullet-holes enough in my karkidge to serve for a rijiment. Ef I git through this job without ketchin' my last sickness, reckon I'll try to git 'ligion'!"

"Look here!" cried Ovelman, the dim light showing the uncomfortable suspicion which was rapidly growing to a certainty in his mind. "Are you both crazy, or am I going mad?"

"Durned ef I know which, ef either, or mebbe all two both on 'em!" returned Nickerson, scratching his head, with a doubtful grin upon his battered countenance. "You can't prove it by me! Ever sence I come into this durned old town I've bin turned eend fer eend, ontel it's a even thing that when I feel like blowin' my nose I twist my big toe-nail off! Crazy, I reckon, or I wouldn't 'a' chipped in on such a slender hand when I see them cusses stringin' you up to the sign-post—"

"Stop!" cried Ovelman, in desperation. "Tell me what you mean in one word. Stringin' who up? Do you mean that that demon incarnate tried to hang me?"

"Let me do the talkin'," said Nichols, with a snort of contempt. "Your tongue tangles things up so, that a Philadelpy lawyer couldn't straighten 'em out in a month o' Sundays! Jest here it lays, boss; you lit onto that pizen cuss, which calls himself Nor' West Nick—"

"Which ain't his name, no more'n it be yours—"

"Shet trap, or I'll stuff my fist down your throat ontel you think you've swallered a elephant!" growled Nichols.

"A-b-u-l, bull—able! which is more then you kin do, the best day you ever see, old wiggle-come-twist!" and Nickerson put up his fists, dancing nimbly back and forth before the angry giant, seemingly spoiling to renew the fight which had been so strangely interrupted on the night last past.

"Time enough fer that," said Nichols slowly, with an ugly glitter in his snake-like eyes, which told how difficult the words were for him to utter. "Jest now we can't a'ford to fight. Let them critters hear us, an' it'd be good-by John!"

"Don't tromp too hard onto a gentleman's corns, then."

What did it all mean?

What had brought these fierce rivals into such close companionship?

To what peril were they making such frequent allusions?

Such were the queries which flashed athwart the confused brain of Arthur Ovelman as he lay there, bound and helpless, fearing he scarcely knew what.

"You know what kind o' deal that feller give the boys, when you sot 'em onto him," resumed Nichols, speaking rapidly, but in the same guarded manner which he and Nickerson had used throughout, even when defying each other to mortal combat. "But I don't reckon you kin 'member much after he fired the shot that knocked you off o' that box?"

"Nothing," replied Ovelman, as the speaker

paused as though for that purpose. "All was a blank until I awoke here."

"You missed a heap, but I reckon it's jest as well you did," with a dry, unpleasant laugh. "'Twouldn't make your dreams none the sweeter, I don't reckon. For instance, you feel sorter tender 'round the thrapple, don't ye, now?"

"Yes—but go on!" impatiently returned Ovelman, ready to grant anything, so as to learn the truth sooner.

"Most men do, after bein' hanged, I reckon—"

"Unless they're left to stretch thar necks too long," interposed Nickerson. "But we cut ye down in time, boss, though it was a monstrous close call fer us all, bet yer life!"

"Hung—who did it? What for?" gasped Ovelman.

"The very gang that you sot on to hang another," laughed the giant, grimly. "Thar was a red-hot time fust, an' them two cusses, Dan Brown an' Kyrie Dando, as ye called him, laid out enough stiffs to start a dozen graveyards o' thar own, afore they was took an' strung up—"

"Not hung—they were not killed?" exclaimed the capitalist, with an earnestness that amazed his hearers.

"Wasn't that what ye was workin' fer all the time?" growled the giant, suspiciously.

"No—that is—" hesitated Ovelman, when Nickerson chipped in with:

"Whar's the use in beatin' 'round the bresh, mate? Tell the story straight through. How Cap'n Slyboots dashed in an' cut the coves down afore they was clean gone over the range, which give us the chance to git in our work—see?"

"Wasn't I comin' to that?" growled the surly fellow, wolfishly. "Could I tell him that afore it happened? Didn't the gang git b'ilin' over with hotness when they looked 'round an' counted noses an' see how big a price that little hangin'-bee hed cost 'em? An' didn't some dirty whelp holler out that it was all owin' to this gent, here, an' to finish the job up in style by 'spendin' him with the other two? An' didn't they do it, too?"

"Sartin they did!" chimed in Nickerson. "An' then, when Cap'n Slyboots an' his Anti-monopolists made thar rush an' scattered the gang, didn't they leave this gent a-hangin' thar, an' didn't we two boldly cut in an' take him in out o' the storm? An' didn't we git cut an' stabbed an' shot clean to pieces a-doin' of it? Waal, I should remark!"

Staring first at one, then at the other, Arthur Ovelman listened to these amazing statements with a growing suspicion. He believed that they were lying—but for what purpose? What could they expect to gain by it?

"Mighty right, we jest did!" added Nichols. "Never did this chicken hev a closer call, but we got through in the squamble while it was the thickest, an' run onder kiver here. Reckon they're huntin' fer us yit, but ef they do find us, boss, they've got to wipe us out afore they hurt you!"

"Thanks—a thousand thanks!" muttered the capitalist.

"Thanks is good—heap good, in thar right place; but thanks ain't a goin' to pay our doctor bills fer gittin' cut an' shot to a riddle!" growled Nichols.

"What say, mate?"

"Spect I've got my last sickness!" returned Nickerson, with a doleful groan. "Reckon I'd kick the bucket afore the sun sets—an' I hain't got ary red cent in my clo'es fer to pay fer the doctor nur the coffin. Good Lawd! jest to think! Me, as is used to eat an' drink from solid gold, to die an' be clucked away in a pauper's grave! It's terrible!"

"But don't fergit that the gent hes said thank ye to us fer savin' him from stretchin' a rope, an' that'd ort to pay us fer gittin' slashed all to bits, hedn't it?"

"I will reward you well, as soon as I get back to the hotel," said Ovelman, choking down his rage at the insolent tones of the giant. "Of course I did not mean thanks alone."

"Mighty glad to hear it!" said Nichols, with a grin. "But you fergit the gang that's huntin' fer us. S'pose they picks us up afore we kin git thar? What, then?"

"Sharks!" exclaimed Ovelman, no longer able to doubt the truth of his suspicions. "Cut my hands free, and I'll talk to you. Not a word until then!"

"Good heavings!" exclaimed Nickerson, with a tragic start. "Why didn't ye say so afore? Them cusses trussed ye up that-a-way, an' we didn't hev time to cut ye loose then. It's so pesky dark in here that we didn't notice—Thar! that feels better, don't it?"

"How much money do you want?" asked Ovelman, rubbing his benumbed wrists as the bonds were severed.

"The price of a life won't be none too much. We're both hurt so bad that it's big odds we don't never git over it. An' all them Lurrs we got in fust in the cave. Reckon the price at which you value your own life won't be none too much. What say, mate?"

"Oh, I ain't no hog!" cheerfully replied Nickerson. "Ef I kick the bucket, which I s'pect to do afore long, that'll be enough to keep you out of the poor-house ontel your sweet mug kin help ye to letch some rich widdier."

"Reckon you're mighty nigh right thar," muttered Nichols, with an ugly grin. "You don't look over-healthy. Shouldn't wonder ef you dropped off suddent afore long. When you do, I'll see that you're kivered deep enough to keep the coyotes from unearthin' ye too soon."

Whatever retort Nickerson may have contemplated to this cold-blooded speech was prevented by an angry cry from the lips of the capitalist, who had thrust his hand into his breast pocket in search of his wallet.

"You scoundrels! I have been robbed! You have stolen my pocket-book—"

The heavy hand of the giant descended upon his mouth, cutting short his angry denunciations, and an angry voice hissed into his ear:

"Quiet, you pizen fool! D'y'want to fetch the hull gang down onto us, that you squeal out like that?"

"But I've been robbed!" he managed to utter.

"Twas done in the crowd, then, of course," volunteered Nickerson. "Sartin you wouldn't hint that two gents like us, who risked thar lives to rescue you, 'd do sech a dirty trick?"

Had Arthur Ovelman been anything like his usual self, cool and clear-witted, he would have taken the hint which was but thinly disguised in those words, and realizing his helpless condition, have made the best of a bad bargain. But his brain had been upset by the unexpected encounter with the man whom he had believed dead long years ago, added to the severe shock of the bullet which glanced from his skull, and he gave full vent to his angry passions.

"Bah! you have fooled me as far as you can. I know you now, for what you are—villainous thieves and robbers! You have lied to me all through. You brought me here to rob me. You have taken my money, my watch, my jewels—and not satisfied with that, have concocted this vile story for the purpose of bleeding me still further. But I'll foil you there! Not another dollar do you get—and I swear that I'll have you hanged for this outrage, the very moment I get free!"

"You hear him preach, mate?" asked Nichols, with a short, hard laugh. "Savage, ain't he? Sounds like he meant it, too!"

"He's gone clean crazy—that's it!" was the grave, sad response, and Nickerson wiped an imaginary tear from one corner of his eye. "He couldn't speak sech cruel words, ef he was in his sober senses. Monstrous pity, too, fer you know what is our sworn duty, as members o' the Anti Loonatick Club!"

"I only wish I could fergit it!" groaned the giant.

"It's got to be did," gloomily. "Only a plum crazy critter would talk that-a-way to men what hed jest got cut all to ribbons in tryin' to save him from the rope. The wust of it is that we can't give him no time fer seein' ef the fit wouldn't pass off an' he come back to his sober senses ag'in. You know what the law says: cut him off short, fer fear the terrible disease spreads fuder! Shell we toss up, pard?"

"Reckon we mought as well. I don't want to stick him, ef I kin shove the job off onto your han's," muttered Nichols.

Dim though the light was, it was yet sufficient to show Arthur Ovelman the terrible change which had come over the faces of the two men. There was no sign of hatred or resentment for his harsh words. Instead, there was an expression of gravity which was even sad, as though they felt sincere regret at a disagreeable duty being thrust upon them.

"Heads ferever!" said Nickerson, as the coin was spun.

"Tails it is!" growled Nichols. "Waal, it's got to be did an' sence the lot falls to me, I'll do it! Watch, an' you kin report how I done the part sot fer me to do."

Drawing a long knife from his belt, the giant moved close to the side of the capitalist, raising the weapon to strike. With a gasping cry, Ovelman tried to check the blow, but in vain!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE REWARD OF MERIT.

Down flashed the steel in the faint, yellow light of the candle, and in that fraction of a moment, Arthur Ovelman suffered all the torments of death.

The knee of the giant pressed heavily upon his chest. One brawny hand clutched his throat so tightly that not a sound could escape his lips. A vise-like grip was fastened upon his feet, to keep him from trying to free himself by kicking, and a voice came to his ears like the soft purring of the treacherous panther:

"Stick him as easy as ye kin, mate! Don't hurt the pore critter any more then ye hev to, though he was powerful rough onto us fellers with his cusses words an' sech—"

He saw the ugly weapon flash before his eyes—felt a cold, curdling thrill through his neck—then all was a blank!

Though he heard it not, there came an angry snarl from the man who held his feet, and then Nickerson grasped his rival by the throat, dragging him backward with a strength which the giant was powerless to resist, taken wholly by surprise.

"Durn an' double-durn ye fer a overgrown, tangle-legged idjit!" muttered the enraged fellow, his little eyes fairly flashing fire as his grip tightened around the throat of the vainly-struggling giant. "Couldn't ye take a hint which was blunter'n a kick? Couldn't ye see what it was I meant? Not to butcher the old fool, but to skeer all the grit out o' him, so he'd come to our terms, an' say thank ye fer the chance into the barg'in? An' thar you went an' stuck him fer keeps! Sp'ilin' the hull business! But I'll take it out o' your hide you indignant, gully-whompin' collywobbus. Take that!"

There was no acting now. The rage of the fat claimant was genuine. As he held the ankles of their captive, he felt that peculiar quiver as the weapon of the giant descended, which always marks death by violence, and he believed that Nichols had taken his grim scheme to frighten Arthur Ovelman for still grimmer earnest, and plunged his steel to the heart.

Wild with rage at having his hopes of securing a moderate fortune thus rudely blasted, he resolved to exact at least a measure of satisfaction from the person of his rival. Back came his ponderous fist—forward it dashed, full into the face of the gasping, gurgling giant, with such force as to tear his throat from the grip of his mad companion, and drive his head back against the ground floor with a sullen thump!

"Cuss ye—let up!" gasped Nichols, as that fierce grip was about to close upon his throat once more. "I didn't stick the critter—look fer yourself, durn ye!"

A gurgling groan from the lips of the capitalist emphasized this statement, and probably saved Nichols from the punishment which Nickerson was only too eager to administer.

"Ef you're lyin', so much the wuss fer you when I find it out!" he growled, warningly. "I'll make things so pizen hot fer ye that when the devil calls ye home, you'll think he's changed his business an' tuck to runnin' a ice-house!"

"Wait ontel this job's over! Then we kin settle the rest whichever way ye like the best!" hissed Nichols.

"All right, my covey! But I'll jest keep one eye onto ye, fer luck. Heap bad medicine onder that tongue o' yours!"

A glance showed Nickerson that he had wronged his companion. The knife had descended, grazing

the neck of the speculator, then sinking to the hilt in the ground floor. It was fear, not death, which had paralyzed his senses, and now his consciousness was being restored.

Swiftly Dave Nichols resumed the position from which he had been dragged by his angry mate, and tearing the knife from its earthen sheath, he elevated it once more, where it hung quivering before the eyes of the capitalist when his senses were restored.

"Mercy!" he gasped, his voice dry and husky. "Can't be did!" muttered Nichols, shaking his head, his eyes looking more owl-like than ever in that forest of straggly beard. "We're bound by the most terrible oaths to slit the wizen o' every crazy galoot we run across—"

"But I'm not crazy—"

"Don't ye say that, when we know better. You must be crazier'n a bob-tail bed-bug, or you'd never 'a' cused us o' robbin' ye—us, who resked our lives jest to save ye from the rope, an' got cut an' slashed an' shot all to pieces a-doin' of it—"

"But I'm not crazy, I tell you! I'm just as sane as you are!" persisted Arthur Ovelman, though, even in that moment, when he felt that his life hung on a thread, he realized the weakness of his comparison, for if these men were not insane, then mortal being was never cursed with unsettled brain.

Slowly the gleaming weapon was lowered, and the glittering eyes of the giant gazed fixedly into his.

"You're sure o' that? You kin swar that you ain't crazy?"

"Of course—you know it as well as I—"

"That settles it—you needn't say any more!" was the stern interruption. "It cut me powerful deep to stick a loonatick, an' when I tried it, my nerve failed me, an' I missed my lick, though I knowed it must be did, an' by me, sence I lost the toss—but now—I kin do the job with a good grace!"

"They ain't no use in goin' over all that we've done fer you, or tellin' the resk we run, then an' now, 'long o' that work. You know it well enough. An' what was our reward? You cussed us. Called us thieves an' robbers. Likewise bloody sharks. Said that we hed robbed ye—picked your pockets. Hlinted out loud that we hed nabbed your weasel-skin, froze to your ticker, confiscated your diamond pin an' dollar-store juley. Them words cut mighty deep, when they come from a critter which we think was loony, an' so not 'sponsible fer his talk; but how is it now that you say you're sober-sensible an' plum' 'countable fer what you spit out at us?"

"An' we two pore but honest critters!" added Nickerson.

"Jes' so. It's a stain which nothin' but blood kin wipe out!" gloomily muttered Nichols, his grip tightening. "Say your pra'rs, old man, ef ye think they kin do ye any good whar you're goin'. In jest two minnits by the watch, you go up the flume fer good an' all!"

Arthur Ovelman was rapidly recovering his wonted coolness and shrewd wits. He saw that the two men were but playing on his fears, and that his life was in no immediate danger, as long as they thought there was any gold to be won.

"That will do!" he growled, sullenly, meeting the glowing eyes of the giant unflinchingly. "It's money you want to heal your injured honor—not my heart's blood. Name your price."

"Kin we afford to do it, mate?" asked Nichols, turning to the fat claimant. "Kin we take the ducats an' let them orful slanders take keer o' themselves?"

"Ef it was a crowd hed hearn him, I'd wote no, louder'n b'iled-down thunder; but they was only us two, an' him. Reckon I'll hold onto my wote ontel he names his figgers. Ef he shoves it up high enough, I'll say give him another chance!" solemnly uttered the fat claimant.

Arthur Ovelman writhed uneasily. Gold was the only God he acknowledged, and it was doubly bitter for him to part with it after this fashion, now that he believed his life was in no actual peril.

"There was more than a thousand dollars in my pocket-book. Take that, and be satisfied. Set me free, and I give my word to let the matter drop, and never trouble you—"

"How kin we take what some other feller's got?" growled Nichols. "Think we're goin' to run 'round huntin' fer a needle in a hay-stack? An' we dyin' fer the want of a doctor?"

"Let me up, promise not to interfere with me for five minutes, and if I don't find the missing property at the end of that period, I'll forfeit double the sum," said Ovelman, with a hard, meaning laugh.

"You'll never git up ontel old Gabriel toots his horn, ef you hint any more that a-way!" indignantly hissed the giant. "Look yer. The time fer foolish-in' is past. We're goin' to be paid fer the service we've done you. Course you'll give it willin'ly. We won't force ye, not a bit. But your conscience is goin' to prick ye so almighty hard that you'll fork over a heap o' yaller salve to heal up all wounds."

"Which it'll be turned over immediate to the fust charitable instertution which we stum'le across," amended Nickerson. "Don't fergit to putt that in, mate."

"How much do you demand?" growled the capitalist. "Be careful, or you may overreach yourself. I'm not a man to submit quietly to extortion, if I'm not too far."

"How much do you 'praise your damages at, mate?"

"Figger one, with three goose-algs fer a tail," was the prompt response, and the giant nodded approvingly.

"Tain't a mite too much, but I reckon we'll make it do. You hearn him, boss? What do you say?"

"A thousand dollars! After your robbing me of more than that sum! I'll never give it!" indignantly.

"Two thousand, you mean, old gent!" grinned Nichols, showing his teeth. "One fer him, an' one fer me. Little enough, too, when you remember all we've did, an' how shamefully you 'sulted us fer doin' of it. Two thousand, an' call it squar'."

"I'll never pay it!" growled Ovelman, doggedly.

"Tain't fer me to say you're lyin', boss, but I'm willin' to bet my last dollar that you ain't tellin' the truth jest now. You kin be the judge, too. An' I give you five minnits to make up your mind. Keep

the time, mate!" and the giant lunged out a watch which Arthur Ovelman instantly recognized as the very one which had been stolen from him, passing it over to Nickerson, then squatting more heavily upon the chest of the luckless capitalist, raising his knife with an ugly flourish as he added: "Two minnits to own up that you lie. Two minnits to say that you'll pay the two thousand—"

"Fer charitable purposes—don't fergit that, pard!" "Two minnits to say you'll fork over that amount, or two minnits to make your peace an' say your pray'rs. Fer at the eend o' that time, ef you're still obstinit, I'll sink a shaft clean through ye—so help me, John Wells!"

Arthur Ovelman saw that the giant was in deadly earnest now. All traces of acting had vanished. There was a red, wolfish glare in his eyes that could not be mistaken. Dearly as he loved his gold, he loved his life still more, and with a cursing groan, he yielded to the inevitable.

"I promise. Take away that cursed knife, and let me up."

"Time ain't all up, is it, mate?"

"Got another minnit left to go on," was the prompt reply.

"Lucky fer you, boss, that you spoke out so quick," with a savage laugh. "Durned ef I know which I'd rather hev, jest now—your ducats or your blood! Don't try any more nonsense, or mebbe I'll take a notion to hev 'em both!"

"Take me to the hotel, and I'll pay the ransom you exact. I can't do it here, as you know only too well."

"Take keer, boss!" warningly hissed the giant. "You're trompin' onto mighty dangerous ground, now, an' ef you come down too heavy, the mine mought 'splode an' blow you so high that the blue-birds 'd build in your ha'r afore you come down to airth ag'in! It's fri'ndly 'vice I'm shovin' at ye."

"It's the truth, nevertheless," doggedly. "I've got no money here. I can only pay you after I get back to the hotel."

"S'pose we run into the gang an' gits cleaned out, tryin' to git that?" soberly demanded Nickerson.

"How can I help that?" growled Ovelman.

"Jest as easy," grinned the rascal. "You come here to buy out Dan Brown, an' brought the ducats 'long with you. You left them with Cunnel Gordon, at the hotel. Write a order fer the money, an' I'll run the resk o' gittin' it all right."

"How am I to know that you will set me free when you've got the money?" suspiciously demanded Ovelman.

"That's a resk you've got to run. But to sot your mind at rest, we'll give you our words o' honor—won't we, mate?"

Nichols nodded, but at the same time fingering the keen point of his knife after a fashion that checked the scornful retort which rose in the throat of their captive.

"Let me up and I'll write the order," he muttered, with a smothered curse. "If you try to double on me, I'll get even, some time, if it takes my last dollar!"

Nichols nimbly arose, leaving the capitalist free to use his arms, and taking a pocket-book from his breast, he opened it and drew therefrom a folded paper.

"They're writin' on one side, but that won't matter much, bein' as you'll git it back from the cunnel. An' yar's a self-writer, too. Yo see I go well fixed, bein' a literary sort o' cuss, when the fit strikes me," he grinned, with matchless impudence, as he handed the articles to Ovelman, who had no difficulty in recognizing his own property.

Biting his lips until the blood stained his teeth in the effort to keep down his raging passions, Ovelman wrote the order bidding Colonel Gordon pay the bearer two thousand dollars from the funds intrusted to his care.

Slowly, word by word, letter by letter, almost, the two extortioners read over the contents, their eyes full of suspicion as their hearts were of avarice.

"It looks all squar'," said Nickerson, dubiously.

Nichols left the valuable document in his hands for the moment, leaping forward and kicking Ovelman's feet from under him, falling on top and clapping one broad palm over his lips to stifle all outcry. Fearing the worst, Ovelman struggled desperately, but he was like a child in that terrible grip, and was quickly choked into semi-unconsciousness.

Rapidly, yet thoroughly, Nichols bound him, hand and foot, then quietly squatted upon his chest while fashioning a rude gag from a portion of the luckless man's clothing.

"What do you mean?" gasped Ovelman, as soon as he could command the power of speech. "I have paid you—"

"Mebbe you've give us more'n we axed, by a heap," grinned the giant, significantly. "Who knows what slick little trick you may hev stuck atween the lines o' that note? I've hearn tell o' sech things, an' they ain't none o' them goin' to be shoved off onto this chicken—not much."

"I don't understand you!" ejaculated Ovelman.

"Mebbe ye don't—which'll be a monstrous heap healthier fer you! How's we to know but what you've got some secret sort o' 'rangement with Cunnel Gordon not to pay out any o' your money 'less it's got the right sort o' mark? Mebbe it's a trap you're tryin' to run our necks into—"

An impatient laugh from Ovelman cut him short. "Bah! I don't do business half-way. You've got the best of me, this deal, and I'm willing to pay the damage. Some time I may get even, but for now you're winner. There will be no difficulty about your getting the money—"

"So much the better fer you!" with a meaning nod. "All the same, I'll make you safe, ontel we finger the ducats—"

"That's business, mate!" cried Nickerson.

"While you watch him, I'll go draw the ducats—"

"Halt!" hissed Nichols, turning his body, while his revolver covered the retreating figure of the fat claimant. "Take a step furdur that way, afore I'm ready to go with you, an' thar'll be cold meat fer a funeral, right here!"

"But we want to git the ducats, don't we?" demanded Nickerson, in an injured tone, but coming to an abrupt halt.

"Sartin—an fer that reason I reckon we'd better both stick together ontel we do git 'em!" with a grin.

"Fore I'd be as 'spicious as you, I'd chaw my own ears off—I would so!" growled Nickerson, indignantly.

"Tain't fer fear o' you runnin' off with the money an' fergittin' to whack up—not a-tall!" declared Nichols, mockingly. "I know you're too honest fer anythin' like that. It's only 'cause I'm 'traid you'll run into that pizen gang an' git strung up ef I ain't along to help ye fight 'em off."

"That's a boss of a different color," smiled Nickerson, as he tore off the bandages from his mock wounds. "I think you meant to sling a slur at my honor, an' I was jest a-goin' fer to mount ye like a hungry wolf. Lucky ye spoke, jest as ye did, or somebody mought 'a' got hurt, bad!"

"That's all right. We'll know each other better afore we git to the eend o' this pritty little speckulation," the giant laughed, then turning to Arthur Ovelman: "Now, boss, I hate to do it, most orful, but I've got to, ye see. Jest open your tater-trap, an' suck this sugar-lit in, of your own free will, or I'll hev to coax ye, the least mite in the world."

As he spoke, he thrust the ugly-looking gag close to the mouth of his prisoner, with one hand, while the other closed significantly upon his throat.

"What for? Why do you want to gag me?" demanded Ovelman.

"To guard ag'in your injurin' your lungs, squealin' out fer help, when you think we're too fur away to hear ye," grinned the far-sighted rascal. "You're down yer in the sullar to a empty house, but though it's kinder out o' the way, 'specially on Sundays, somebody mought come 'long an' hear ye."

"But if anything should happen to you—if you should leave me here, bound and gagged, and never return—"

"They's rats a-plenty to set you loose afore you quite starve, ef they only happen to begin gnawin' at the right place," interrupted Nichols, with a diabolical grin.

"I'll give you my solemn pledge not to utter a sound above my breath, if you will only leave me ungagged—"

"It can't be did, so that's the eend of it!" doggedly. "I ain't a-goin' to run no longer chances then I hev to. Ef we don't git snooped up an' roped, we'll be back here jest as soon as we've fingered your ducats. Ef we don't come—waal, you'd better keep a-prayin' that that won't happen so!"

As though tired of argument, Nichols closed his sinewy fingers on the throat of his victim with such a good will that Ovelman, fearing to be choked to death, opened his jaws sufficiently to receive the gag.

"That's the ticket!" grinned the giant, relieving him of his weight. "Good-by, boss—see you later!"

Extinguishing the candle, the two precious rascals left their victim in darkness, to imagine ten thousand horrors, while they hastened away to reap their golden harvest.

Slowly enough the minutes dragged on to the helpless wretch lying there in the darkness, listening to the faint squeakings of the rats, which, now that the light had vanished, were recovering their natural audacity. What if they should attack him? And strange as it may seem, that was the most acute fear which now assailed the capitalist. The mocking words of the giant rung in his ears, and every muscle began to crawl and quiver as the objects of his mortal loathing and fear, ran over his helpless person. He could think of nothing else. Each moment was an age of torture. He would not have been worse frightened had each rat been transformed into a poison-swollen rattlesnake.

The memory of that hour would never leave Arthur Ovelman while his life lasted, and as the rats, with many an indignant squeak, fled to their holes and hiding-places as the sound of cautious footsteps were heard, Arthur Ovelman almost swooned with joy.

"You played a squar' game, boss, an' we're bound to do the same," came the guarded voice of Nichols through the gloom. "We got the money, though that pompous cuss, Cunnel Gordon, did his level best to pump us dry—but the pumps wouldn't play, with a cent!"

While speaking, the giant lighted the candle to show him where the fastenings of the gag were, and as his jaws were set at liberty, Ovelman uttered a piteous gasp.

"Thank Heaven, you have come! Oh, those horrible rats!"

"Waal, I ber-durned!" ejaculated the giant. "Skeered at them little innocent critters? You, a great big man—"

"It was worse than death, ten thousand times over!" shuddered Ovelman. "I'd rather have rattlesnakes crawling—"

"Talk a-plenty!" growled Nickerson, impatiently. "We want to skin out o' this, in a hurry—you hear me, mate?"

"Jest so—but you got to wait here a little longer, boss. Give us hafe an hour to make tracks afore you come out, or it'll be the wusser fer your health—"

"Cut me loose—leave the light, so those devils won't dare come out, and I'll give any promise you can ask!"

Nichols stared at him suspiciously, dreading some cunning trick, but even he could see that the horror shown by the capitalist was genuine, and a contemptuous laugh hissed through his teeth as he made reply:

"All right. You shell hev your way. But mind ye: ef you try to break kiver afore the hafe-hour is up, you'll hear somethin' drap—an' drap so heavy that it'll be all night with you! Jest chaw onto that, will ye?"

Cutting him loose, the two rascals turned and stole away, eager to make their escape with the gold they had won, leaving Ovelman alone with the rats.

CHAPTER XVII.

ARTHUR OVELMAN RIDES—WHITHER?

LEFT alone by the two fellows for whose apocryphal services he had been so heavily taxed, Arthur Ovelman felt almost cheerful, so great was the contrast between his present situation and that which he had so recently occupied. Now he had a light, and was in full possession of his limbs. Then he was bound, helpless and in the dark, wholly at the mercy of the rats, objects of his greatest abhorrence.

Grasping a stick which lay near the capitalist

composed himself to wait the period indicated by the black-mailers, resolved to give them no excuse for further molesting him.

"I'll get the money back, by hook or by crook," he muttered, keeping a sharp lookout for rats, "but I'd rather lose it, ten times over, than to have the story get out!"

A faint smile just touched his lips for an instant as he reflected how cunningly the two rascals had layed their parts, how adroitly they had worked upon his fears. There was a grim humor visible through it all, now, even to his eyes, but at the time it had seemed anything but a jest.

"I'd double their haul, if I could be sure that they would serve me as faithfully as they have served themselves in this little game," and there came an ugly light into his eyes as he made a savage stroke at a skulking rat. "Curse the luck that brought me here—or rather curse my folly in listening to the girl! If she had not seen him—How did he escape? They swore to his body—and men, too, who had been in his company day after day. Yet they were wrong! This devil is Kyrie Dando, deny the fact as he may. He means to make me trouble, too. I saw that in his eyes from the very first, and I thought to get ahead of him, by stirring up the mob—curse them for feather-heads! A single breath was enough to face them about, even when they seemed at their fiercest. Better have bided my time—better have watched and—"

His mutterings died away, but there was a look in his face, an evil light in his eyes that told plainly enough in what direction his thoughts were trending.

Deeply and moodily he pondered, forgetting where he was for the time being in his black plotting for the future, only awaking to a consciousness of the time and place when the candle burned out, the smoking wick falling from the splinters, leaving the cellar in darkness the most intense.

With a cold shudder of terror as he thought of the rats, Arthur Ovelman made a blind rush for the place of exit, only pausing when out in the full glare of the afternoon sun, which seemed to blind him.

Only then did he remember what the two black-mailers had told him about an avenging, blood-thirsty mob, and he shrunk back against the deserted cabin, peering anxiously around.

The main street was almost entirely free of people. He could detect nothing which told of a mob, and then he realized that this, too, had been part of the comedy played so adroitly by the two rascals.

Still, he preferred to run no unnecessary risks, and settling in his mind the location of the Arlington, he stole along through the thinly-scattered shanties which were planted promiscuously back of the one street of which Rocky Bar could boast, and finally succeeded in reaching the hotel without attracting particular attention.

Colonel Gordon eyed him curiously, the capitalist fancied, but he gave that slow-speaking worthy no time to frame a question, hastening up to his room, where he quickly changed his soiled and blood-stained garments. His head was aching heavily from the effects of Nor' West Nick's "creasing shot," but a careful examination told him that he had little to fear from that source, beyond a temporary inconvenience and soreness. For reasons of his own, he did not care to call in the services of a physician, and managed to cover the lips of the wound with court-plaster himself. Then, all traces of his recent misadventures obliterated, to the casual observer, Arthur Ovelman hastened to the room where he had left his daughter, safely locked in.

He found all as he had left it, and opening the door, he crossed the threshold.

Marjean, paler than ever, her eyes showing traces of long and bitter weeping, glanced up at his approach, but then her head drooped once more, and silence reigned.

Arthur Ovelman's brow contracted with a heavy frown, and the old, hard light deepened in his eyes as he approached the sorrowing woman and sunk heavily into a chair beside her.

"Now look here, Marjean. There's reason in all things, or there should be. You are old enough to know better than to give way in this manner. I am ashamed of you, girl!"

"For what?" demanded the woman, raising her head with a swift gleam in her eyes. "Because I have a heart, still?"

"Because you will persist in wearing it on your sleeve. Why, if you knew what all the town is saying about you, you would feel like asking the earth to open and swallow you up!"

A hard, bitter laugh broke from her lips.

"What care I what they say or think? The time for that is past. I only know this—that the man I love is still alive—that he is here, in the same town, breathing the same air that I breathe—"

"You are mad, girl!" loudly interrupted the man.

"If I am mad, who made me so?"

"Your own rank folly! Come—don't force me to utter any more unpleasant truths. Look at the matter calmly, and you will see that you are wholly in the wrong. Kyrie Dando died years ago. But, even granting that he is still living—that this fellow whom you believed you recognized last night, is the escaped felon, the runaway forger—"

"A felon through your cunning arts—an innocent man, doomed to suffer for your sins!" cried Marjean, her face aglow and her eyes flashing with an unwonted fire, as she sprung to her feet and confronted the astonished schemer.

"Silence!" he grated, angrily. "How dare you—"

"Strike!" she said, unflinchingly, as his clinched fist menaced her. "It will not be the first blow you have dealt me, though the other left no mark which ordinary eyes could see and comment upon, since it bruised my heart, not face."

The uplifted hand sunk to his side, and with a forced laugh Arthur Ovelman resumed his seat, saying, with affected carelessness:

"Bah! I'm a fool to notice what a crazy child says—but for all that, my lady, I advise you to go slow. What I said in a fit of anger, may come to pass after calm reflection, unless you show speedy signs of amendment."

Despite her desperation, there was something in his voice that chilled the blood of the woman, as she

sunk into her chair, covering her eyes once more with her hand.

"I don't want to speak to or treat you harshly, Marjean," he added, more kindly. "But if you refuse to listen to reason, I must use harsher measures. You have brooded so long over this matter that your brain is on the point of giving way, and you are unable to see matters as they are. Kyrie Dando is dead. This man swore that he was not the one you fancied. But even if he lied then, in saying that, he denied you, he said that he was married, with a family of children. After that, even granting that he is Kyrie Dando, what is he, what can he be to you?"

"He spoke under a misapprehension," said Marjean, the old spirit flashing into her eyes as she lifted her head and met the lowering gaze of her father without flinching. "He believed that I swore to a lie in those terrible days. He wanted to shame and wound me in turn. He will beg my pardon when he knows all—when he knows that you were the criminal, not me—that I, as well as he, suffered from your cunning plot to ruin him forever!"

"Stop!" sternly cried Ovelman. "You have said enough. Not even my daughter shall accuse me of such a crime. Dare to hint at such a thing again, and I swear that I will put you where your rank folly can hurt no one!"

He ceased speaking, his face purple with rage, his voice choking so that he could say no more. Again the woman shrunk away, filled with a nameless horror.

With a desperate effort Arthur Ovelman composed himself.

"Now listen to me, Marjean. Like a fool, I listened to your entreaties and brought you here, at no little inconvenience to myself. I will see this Brown, and close the bargain for his mine at once, then I will take you away with me, to our home, if you recover your senses; to an asylum, if you still entertain these mad fancies. Give me your solemn promise that you will not leave this room—that you will make no attempt to see this fellow whom you fancy is Kyrie Dando, magically restored to life—that you will not speak to him, even should he be audacious enough to seek an interview, and I will leave you at liberty. Refuse, and I will lock you in this room and give the landlord warning that you have gone crazy—that you are dangerously mad."

Before Marjean could answer, the sound of hasty footsteps on the stairs startled them, then came a quick rap at the door.

With a warning glance toward his daughter, Arthur Ovelman opened the door, at which stood a man, holding in one hand a sealed letter, his appearance that of one who had ridden fast and far.

"Your name is Ovelman, I reckon?" was the blunt query.

"Yes—what do you want?" snapped the capitalist.

"Letter fer you, from the boss. Ain't no time to be perlice," jerked forth the messenger, leaning against the door-casing as though greatly wearied, holding forth the note.

"And pray who may you call the boss?" demanded Ovelman, a little suspiciously, as he gingerly took the soiled letter.

"Reckon you'll find his name inside, but ef you want to know in a hurry, we call him Dan Brown," independently.

Arthur Ovelman tore open the envelope and hastily ran his eyes over the contents. They were short, and to the point:

"A. OVELMAN, Esq.:—"

"DEAR SIR:—Business of importance which will admit of no delay, calls me to Denver. If we are to make a trade for the Jealous Girl, it must be at once. You know my price. Cash down, and the mine is yours—but the offer must be closed with at once, or the bargain is off. I will just have time to show you over the mine, if you respond immediately on receipt of this. No time to give details of last night's work. The bearer can be trusted, and will answer all questions. If you want the property, come—if not, good-bay. In great haste, yours,

"DAN BROWN."

"Where is Mr. Brown?" asked Ovelman, turning to the man.

"At the mine, when I left him. He said he'd wait fer us at the shanty, jest this side," was the prompt reply.

"How far from here?"

"Matter o' three miles or sech. You goin'? 'Scuse me ef I seem blunt, but I hed orders from the boss to come back, hot-foot, whether you come along or not," he added apologetically.

"A delay of five minutes will make little difference. We can more than make that up by fast riding, said Ovelman, coolly. "I've had a little experience to-day that makes me dubious about going into anything blindfolded."

While speaking, he took a letter from his pocket which had been written him by Dan Brown, before he came West, and carefully compared the two. Making allowance for the last received letter being written with a pencil, and on some rough substance, the resemblance was sufficiently strong to dissipate his vague suspicions.

"All right. I will be with you by the time you have them saddle me a horse. Tell the landlord as you go down."

Without a word the messenger turned upon his heel and clattered down the stairs, while Ovelman addressed Marjean:

"That mine business calls me away, and I may not be able to return before dark. I will see what I asked, and I will leave you at liberty. You will?"

Her dark eyes met his gaze, but she gave no further sign, and in a fit of rage he turned away, with a muttered curse.

She heard the key turned in the lock, then the heavy footsteps of her parent descending the stairs. A short delay, then the rapid clattering of hoofs on the tiny street told her that he had departed in company with the messenger.

Arthur Ovelman was a good rider, and easily kept his place beside the messenger, who was none other than Tim Toplift, who had brought the news of the descent of Captain Slyboots and his gang upon the Jealous Girl, to Rocky Bar, just in time to

aid Dan Brown in proving an *alibi* for Nor' West Nick.

"In his note, Mr. Brown said that you would answer any questions which I might see fit to ask you. Is the property increasing or decreasing in value?"

"Ef it was *mine*, money couldn't buy it—only fer one thing," was the prompt reply.

"Pray what is that?" asked Ovelman, with interest.

"That cussed Cap'n Slyboots an' his gang! We fit 'em off last night, so they didn't do much damage, but—"

"Last night!" echoed Ovelman, his eyes opening widely. "What happened then? Tell me all about it, please!"

A shade of annoyance swept across the face of Toplift, but vanished as quickly. In ignorance that the man he was now riding with had been shot senseless by Nor' West Nick, just before he came upon the scene with his startling announcement, he had taken it for granted that the raid was known.

"They ain't much to tell, but it ain't no secret. Ye see, this crooked cuss which they calls Cap'n Slyboots, 'pears to hev a special spite ag'inst the boss—leastways, he does all he kin to hurt him, both in pocket and in person, though the boss ain't dead yet by a long sight!"

"Last night, while me an' some others was keepin' guard, the dirty whelps come down onto us, heavy. Lucky we smelled 'em out just afore they got in thar work, an' was all ready. They was a good deal o' powder burnt, an' two o' our boys got throwed cold, but we fit 'em off, an' kep' 'em from doin' any real harm to the works. They hunz around fer a while, an' when they *did* go, we was skeered to show our noses outside, fer fear they was layin' fer us still. But 'long in the forenoon, I made a break fer town, an' told the boss what was up. He come out at once, an' then a man come to him with a note which 'peared to stir the boss all up on eend. I don't know what was in it, but he told me to saddle up fer to come to Rocky Bar, an' when I was ready, he give me that note an' told me to hunt you out as quick as I could, to give you it, to ax was the answer yas or no, an' hen to mosey back hot-foot, whether you 'cluded to go along or not. An' that's 'bout all."

Arthur Ovelman seemed satisfied, and they rode on in silence. He was busily thinking the matter over. He believed the mine to be cheap at the figure fixed, from all the papers he had seen, as well as from his talk with Dan Brown since his arrival at Rocky Bar, and only for this mysterious creature, Captain Slyboots, he would not have entertained a single doubt as to the advisability of closing promptly with the offer, though he had not told the exact truth in saying that he was purchasing for a stock company, acting only as agent. The company might exist in the future, but at present no one was interested in the matter but himself.

"Thar's the place whar the boss said he would meet us," suddenly said Toplift, pointing out a rough-looking shanty half-hidden among the brush and rocks. "He's inside, I reckon."

Arthur Ovelman touched up his horse, and galloped up to the door, which swung ajar as he leaped to the ground, and a voice called out:

"Good. You came, then? Come in for a moment."

As Ovelman crossed the threshold, his extended hand was grasped, he was jerked forward—then came a crushing blow. Without a groan, he fell forward on his face.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SCARLET MYSTERY.

"WHOORAY, boys! I knowed I couldn't be so mighty fur out o' the way—yender's the old split-top cedar, an' jest beyond that ag'in we'll find the old shanty!"

"We ain't doin' any more hollerin' ontel we see what we've got to holler fer!" doggedly retorted another voice, in the tone of one who had often been the victim of misplaced confidence.

"Ef ever you ketch this chicken out huntin' fer deer in these hills ag'in, jest knock me on the head an' plant me whar the wolves won't get p'izened tryin' ter swallow me!"

"Things has gone sorter crooked, sure enough—"

"Crooked ain't no word fer it!" in supreme disgust. "Not so much as a deer-track in a all day tramp. One squar' fall over the durned stumps an' dornicks fer each rod o' ground kivered. Not a durned mouthful o' grub 'cept bad whisky, an' you must tumble down an' bu'st wide open the only bottle which hed a drap left in it, fer snake-bites!"

"Waal, it's mighty hard, I know," laughingly, "but thar's a good squar' drink ahead o' us now, so nigh that I kin 'ena'most smell it from here. We'll be all right then—a open, easy road leadin' straight to Rocky Bar—"

"It's all moonshine! They ain't no bottle thar. They ain't no shanty—never was—never will be. Durned ef I believe thar is any sech place as Rocky Bar. It's all a snare an' a delusion, an' we'll jest wake up to git fooled, like it hes bin ever sence we struck out on this fool prospect."

"One thing we can be sure of, anyway—worse luck!" impatiently muttered the third member of the hunting-party, "and that is, that Grumbling Ginger hasn't bitten off his tongue in any of his tumbles. Do give us a rest, old man."

"Ef he spits out any other grumble, divil the sup o' the bottle shill he have when we hitches onto it. Whooray—didn't I tell ye so? Ain't that the shanty? Ain't thar a bottle o' the fines, mount'in dew jest waitin' fer us to kiss it in thar! An' you contrairy critters throwin' it up to me that I was lost, an' couldn't find my way nowhars! An' I all the time leadin' of ye straight as a die to the spot whar glory awaits

ye—glory o' the sort that tickles a man clean down to the tips o' his toes, an' makes him want to climb up a rainbow jest fer the fun o' slidin' down the other side!"

"That ain't the shanty—or ef it is, somebody has bin thar ahead o' us an' found the bottle an' dreened it dry—"

"Look yer, Ginger, none o' that. Don't ye go to croakin' that-a-way, or blamed ef I don't play I was a 'stillery an' run you through it! I've sot my teeth on hev'n a good, squar drink afore I go any furdur, an' ef that bottle hes mizzled, I'll squeeze enough o' the extry juice out o' you fer tryin' to knock our 'ticipations higher'n a kite—I will, sure!"

The trio were rather more than two-thirds drunk already. Early that morning they had left Rocky Bar, armed with rifles and side-arms, bound to bring in a deer, if only to prove their pretensions as mighty hunters before they took up the pick and drill as being more profitable methods of exercise.

They had supplied themselves with more liquid than dry ammunition, and as a natural consequence, they found little game. Mishap after mishap befell them. They lost their way among the hills. They had nothing to eat. Water was scarce, and their fatigue led them to use up their whisky much more rapidly than they had counted on doing. Then came the crowning misfortune, already hinted at by the Grumbling Ginger. An unlucky stumble broke the bottle which they had been holding in reserve, and they were left as the sun sunk behind the hill without a particle of "snake medicine."

But every cloud has its silver lining, and Wilkins gave vent to a yell of triumph as a forgotten fact came into his mind. A week or so before, as he hastened to explain, he had lost a quart flask of whisky. Half drunk at the time, he had been unable to find it, but now, in this emergency, his memory grew clear, and he knew that he had hidden it in an old shanty some three or four miles from Rocky Bar, where it no doubt was now awaiting them.

Cross-questioning him only deepened his confidence, and as soon as they could get their bearings, the trio struck out for the cache, and though they strayed widely, at times, they finally came out near the cabin, as detailed.

Only pausing in the moonlight road long enough to utter the solemn threat against his grumbling companion, Wilkins plunged forward and thrust the door open, blundering across the threshold, uttering a surly curse as he stumbled and nearly fell at full length over some obstacle.

"Eyes wide open tight, mates!" he shouted, with an angry curse. "Some low-down cuss hes jumped our claim, but ef he's got drunk on my whisky, durned ef I don't let it out o' his skin with the p'int o' my butcher—I will, sure as shootin'!"

"Strike a light! We'll take him on the jump if he tries to run away, or shows his teeth!" cried Matney.

A hollow groan broke upon their hearing, so full of misery, of wretchedness, that Wilkins made one leap and crossed the threshold of the cabin, coming in violent contact with his mates, who grappled with him, using their fists and feet with drunken fury, taking him for the intruder.

"We got the cuss—ugh!"

Down in a heap the trio went together, a curse of anger bursting from Wilkins as he dealt Ginger a blow in the stomach that fairly knocked the wind out of him for the time.

"Durn yer fer two crazy idjits!" he snarled, tearing himself loose and scrambling to his feet. "Cain't ye tell a white man from a spook? Fer two cents I'd w'ar ye one out ag'inst the other tell ye cain't see—"

"Help—for the love of marcy, help!" came a gasping, husky voice from the interior of the cabin, and most effectually putting an end to the quarrel between the hunters.

"Come out an' show yourself ef ye ain't a dead critter!" spluttered Wilkins, drawing a revolver, but standing his ground. "Who be ye, an' what's the matter?"

"Tim Toplift—so nigh murdered thar ain't no fun in it! They's another dead man in herel Who're you?"

A ghastly, blood-stained face showed itself at the door, plainly visible in the clear moonlight, and a cry of amazement burst simultaneously from the lips of the three half-drunken hunters as they recognized the foreman of the Jealous Girl, well known to them all.

"Who did it? Whar is they?" demanded Wilkins, with a swift glance around them, moving quickly into the shadows.

"Don't leave me, boys—fer the love of heaven don't run an' leave me here no longer with this cold meat!" cried Toplift, and he dragged himself across the threshold. "He's gone long ago—they ain't no danger—don't run away an' leave a pore devil what cain't help hisself—"

"Not a bit of it, mate!" responded Wilkins, now nearly sobered. "We was jest on the lookout fer snags. We'll stick to ye ontel you're right and up, bet your life!"

"Who did it? What for?" asked Matney.

"Git me away from this hole—git me down to

town, fust. It was a hellish trick—an' me workin' the flesh off o' my four bones to sarve him! But I'll git even—I'll git even!"

"The pore critter's clean loony," muttered Wilkins, in a low tone. "You two take a little scoot 'round to see ef thar ain't nobody hidin' nigh, while I strike a light an' look into the shanty. Somebody dead, he says. Thar's bin bloody black doin's goin' on here, an' we must find out all we kin afore the scent grows too cold. Scoot, an' keep all eyes open!"

Ginger and Matney immediately obeyed, while Wilkins hastily gathered a few dry twigs which he ignited, and passing over the prostrate form of Tim Toplift, entered the cabin.

A ghastly sight met his gaze, and he started back with a low cry of horror and indignation as he saw what it had been over which he had stumbled but a short time before.

Lying in the center of the one small room, flat upon his back, with face upturned and arms flung out as though in the agony of sudden death, lay a corpse. A little pool of coagulated blood rested upon his bosom, marking where a long, keen blade had probed his heart. A frightful gash showed across his throat, more than half severing the neck, telling how sure the cold-blooded assassin had done his work.

It was all that remained of Arthur Ovelman! Wilkins staggered back and out of the cabin, the crackling torch dropping from his trembling fingers.

"It'd sicken a hog!" he muttered, as his two mates came out from the shadows, satisfied that the murderer or murderers had fled from the scene of this damnable crime. "I ain't no chicken, but 'peared like I'd hev to throw up my boots ef I stopped thar another minnit!"

"Who is it? Anybody we know?" asked Matney, with the low, awed tones which come so natural to all when brought face to face with such a deed of blood.

"The old man who tuck part in the rumpus down in town last night—the one as tuck away 'be gal, ye know."

"Sure he's crossed the divide?"

"Take a squint in thar, an' you won't need to ax that!" muttered Wilkins, with a shudder.

"So dead that ef he'd got more lives than a cat, they wouldn't 'a' gone hafe way 'round!"

"A drink, mates!" gasped Toplift, raising his head and trying to drag himself toward them.

"Some whisky, ef ye got it. My head's a-splittin' open, an' I'm breathin' fire—"

The trio interchanged glances, then Wilkins said:

"It's got to be did. Thar's whisky in thar, an' though I'd ruther step over a heap o' p'izen rattlers, we got to hev it fer the pore cuss."

"We must see how things look, anyway, to tell them when we get back to camp," said Matney, gravely. "It can't rest here. Blood calls for blood, and while we're gone, somebody may come back to make 'way with the body."

"Scratch up stuff fer a light, then. We'll take a look all in a heap. That whisky we've got to have—fer him!"

Working with silent energy, they soon collected stuff for torches, and entered the cabin together. In silence they gazed upon the horrible sight, then Wilkins crossed over to the further corner, tearing aside some dirt and grass, unearthing the flask of liquor which had been the means of their making this important discovery.

"See ef you kin diskiver any sign to tell ag'inst them as did the bloody job—I'll look after Toplift."

"They ain't no use—Tim must know who it was," said Ginger, hastily beating a retreat from the ghastly scene.

Wilkins gave the suffering man a drink of whisky, and the ardent spirits seemed to put new life into his veins. But to all their questions he shook his head, only saying:

"Not now—wait untel we git down to town. Then I'll tell the little I know, when we see who it is as takes the lead in the bloody business."

Wilkins rudely bandaged the wound upon Toplift's skull, giving him the flask of liquor to use as he saw fit, and by the time his task was done, the wounded man, thanks to the whisky, was able to walk. And leaving the corpse of Arthur Ovelman lying in its gore, they took up the trail to Rocky Bar, eager to tell their tragic tale and set the avengers of blood upon the track of the criminal.

Time and again they tried to get Toplift to tell them all he knew concerning the strange affair, but the man kept his lips obstinately closed, and they began to suspect that there would be more difficulty in getting at the truth of the matter than they had at first believed.

At length the town was reached, and though Toplift faintly objected, the three hunters led him into the saloon run by St. Clair Guthrie, where they knew the largest audience would be found at that hour.

"Drap your keerds, gents!" cried Wilkins, in a loud tone. "Thar's a heap more 'portant business on hand jest now—"

"What do you mean, sir?" sternly demanded St. Clair Guthrie, turning in his chair, a cocked revolver gleaming in his white hand. "If you think to raise any disturbance—"

"Putt up your weepion, boss. Thar's bin

bloody murder did, an' it's got to be 'vestigated, keerds or no keerds—"

A chorus of cries and questions cut the hunter short, and it was some little time before he could make himself heard amid the confusion. But as soon as he uttered the name of Arthur Ovelman, whose connection with the strange and exciting events which had stirred Rocky Bar to its very foundations had rendered all interested in him, silence fell over the crowd, and his story was rapidly told.

"We left the pore old feller out yander, part beca'se we couldn't tote him in, part beca'se we thought it best to leave everything jest as we found it, ontel a committee o' you gents could take a squint at it all. We couldn't find no sign to tell who did the bloody murder, but here's Tim Toplift, who kin tell the hull thing, ef I ain't wide o' my guess."

With his bare, bloody-banded head and scarlet-streaked face, Tim Toplift stood there the cynosure of all eyes as the three hunters drew a little back. His eyes were downcast, and there was a dogged look upon his face which spoke volumes to those among the crowd who knew him best.

"Tell what you know, my good fellow," said St. Clair Guthrie, in a soft, conciliating voice, after a moment's hesitation as though waiting for some other to take the direction of matters. "You are among friends, now, and can speak freely."

"They was murder done. The old gent was killed. That's all I kin tell you about it," said Toplift, slowly.

A fiery glint came into the eyes of the gambler as he heard this unexpected answer. A mutter of angry astonishment ran through the crowd. There was danger brewing for Tim Toplift, and none knew this better than himself, but the dogged expression only deepened upon his face.

"Don't be a blame fool, Tim!" muttered Wilkins, in his ear. "Tell all you know, an' that in a hurry, or they'll begin to think that you hed a finger in the pie yourself—an' when they once git started in that track, your neck'll grow a feet afore they let up on pullin' the rope—"

"Back, there!" cried St. Clair Guthrie, sternly, again drawing his revolver and threatening Wilkins. "Let him tell his own story without your help. There's some mystery in this affair, and, since it has been crowded upon me, I'll probe it to the very bottom, let the lightning strike where it will!"

"Once more, Mr. Toplift, who killed Arthur Ovelman?"

"How kin I tell what I don't know?" sullenly growled the foreman of the Jealous Girl. "I know that he was killed—I know that somebody shot me—an' that's all I do know, ontel these gents come along an' found us."

A portly figure thrust itself through the crowd, and came to a pause midway between St. Clair Guthrie and Toplift.

"Possibly I can throw some light on this matter, gentlemen," said Colonel Gordon, with a bland bow and smile.

"If you know the criminal, name him!" sharply uttered the gambler. "This is no time to stand on ceremony."

"I am ignorant of the name—"

"Then why crowd in here?" a little impatiently.

"You are too hasty, my dear sir," said the colonel, with a bow of injured dignity. "Though I do not know who the criminal may be, yet I can give some important information which may set you on the right track."

"Out with it, then—and be as brief as your—your nature will let you," added St. Clair Guthrie, checking himself, and substituting words very different from those which had risen to his tongue's end.

The pompous colonel looked highly indignant, and there were signs of an explosion, when a growing muttering among the impatient crowd warned him not to tax them too far. Choking down his anger at the cavalier manner in which the gambler treated him, he spoke rapidly:

"This afternoon, at about two o'clock, this man, Timothy Toplift, came to my place of business, asking to see Mr. Ovelman on important business. According to instructions left me, I directed him to the rooms occupied by the gentleman, and a few minutes later he, Toplift, came down stairs again and told me that Mr. Ovelman wanted a good horse saddled for his use at once. I had scarcely given the order when the gentleman himself came down and told me that he was going to meet Dan Brown on business connected with the Jealous Girl."

"You are positive you understood him?" demanded St. Clair Guthrie, his blue eyes glittering like those of a serpent whose coveted prey is just before it, helplessly at its mercy. "This is a matter of life or death, and a single mistake may result in the murder of an innocent man, instead of punishing a dastardly assassin."

"I am accusiog nobody," gravely responded the colonel, his rather ludicrous pomposity vanishing as he realized the gravity of the situation. "I am simply telling you the facts of the case, as I know them. I don't say that Toplift killed the gentleman—for all I know, he is perfectly innocent of any connection with the crime—"

"What object could he have for committing the deed?"

"Before he left the office, Mr. Ovelman withdrew from my charge the sum of fifty thousand dollars in greenbacks. These he carefully placed in his breast-pocket, saying at the same time that the money was to pay for the Jealous Girl. He left the hotel. I saw him mount the horse I furnished, and saw him ride off in company with Timothy Toplift."

For a moment after Colonel Gordon ceased speaking, there was a silence almost oppressive, all eyes being turned upon Toplift, who shifted uneasily from foot to foot, but still keeping his eyes on the floor, still with that dogged look upon his face. And his face grew more ghastly as a rough voice cried out from somewhere in the crowd:

"Reason enough fer killin' a dozen men! Make the critter tell all he knows, or else string him up to loosen his tongue!"

That blunt speech was sufficient. It was like casting a blazing torch into a crowded hay-mow. The murmur swelled to a roar—the cry above all others the most horrible and awe-inspiring—the yell for human blood!

"Back!" cried St. Clair Guthrie, facing the crowd with leveled pistols. "Back, I say! or I'll shoot—to kill!"

The mob paused, but it was only to make a surer rush.

CHAPTER XIX.

A TALE OF HORROR.

EVEN his worst enemy must have given the sport of Rocky Bar credit for rare nerve and plenty of it, as he stood there facing the howling, bloodthirsty crowd, single-handed against two-score, defending Tim Toplift from the sudden outburst of fury, all the more dangerous from being so blind and unreasoning.

"Back! keep your distance, gentlemen!" he cried, his voice ringing out hard and menacing, his blue eyes flashing fire, his white face hardest and dangerous. "It's the truth we want to find out, and that we'll have, if you act sensibly. The man can't escape us. He will confess everything, if he is given time to realize his danger—"

"Which he kin see the quickest through the noose of a trail-rope!" rudely interrupted the man who had started the cry for lynching. "Down with 'em both, ef he stan's in the way."

St. Clair Guthrie saw the crouching, restless quiver which ran through the crowd at this fiery speech, and past experience told him that the loss of an instant might be fatal. There was only one chance, and that one he took.

With a motion swift as light his weapon shifted its aim and covered the bold speaker. Only an instant—barely long enough for the fellow to realize his peril, without giving him a chance to avoid it—then the revolver exploded. Straight through the brain crashed the missile. One hoarse, strangling cry. The death-stricken wretch staggered back, turned half-way round, his eyeballs almost bursting from their sockets, then fell heavily forward upon his face, a corpse ere his carcass touched the blood-stained floor!

Instinctively the crowd shrunk away, horror in their eyes and mingling with the fear in their faces. It was his one chance, and St. Clair Guthrie promptly improved it.

"I hated to do it, gentlemen, but the bot-headed fool brought it upon himself. He had his warning, just as you have yours. Crowd me too close, and he'll have company over the range. This fellow may have killed Arthur Ovelman, but he's got to be proven guilty before being lynched—and I call on all order-loving citizens to second me in this resolve."

"Tain't no more'n right, an' durned ef I ain't with ye tell the cows come home!" cried Wilkins, ranging himself alongside the gambler, with ready revolvers. "Fair play, mates! The trail-rope won't spile, an' maybe thar's a heap wuss critter mixed up in the scrape than Tim Toplift. Let's make a clean haul while we're 'bout it—not go off at hafe-cock!"

"It is no more than fair that the prisoner should be given another chance to clear himself," added Colonel Gordon, joining the twain, armed with a brace of saw-handled dueling-pistols. "Fall into the ranks, men of law and order!"

Grumbling Ginger and Matney were the next to join the men who guarded Toplift, but the force of the wave was broken, and the crisis past. The cry for human blood had died away, and the iron nerve of the gambler had won, though none better realized the terrible risk he had run.

"Thanks, gentlemen!" he cried, his voice as clear, as even and tranquil as though the wings of death had never cast their chilling shadow over his head. "I knew that you would recognize the correctness of my position the moment you took a second thought. It is justice we want, not a lynching picnic, plunged into without rhyme or reason. A foul murder has been committed, and that upon the person of a stranger here, who confided in our honesty and manhood. As white men, with hearts that can feel for and sympathize with the poor young lady who is left an orphan in a strange land, we

owe it to ourselves and to Rocky Bar to probe this matter to the very bottom, to get at the whole truth, and then avenge the foul deed, let the lightning strike where it will!"

St. Clair Guthrie paused to catch his breath, and a cry of approval burst from the easily-swayed crowd.

"I could wish that somebody else had taken the lead in this matter, but since I have been crowded into acting as dealer, I'll run the cards out. Tim Toplift, look here," and St. Clair Guthrie placed a hand heavily upon the shoulder of the foreman of the Jealous Girl, looking him full in the eye, with a stern, impressive gaze.

"You know more about this matter than you choose to tell. You were the last one to see Arthur Ovelman alive, so far as we can learn. He rode away from Rocky Bar in your company, taking with him a large sum of money. A few hours later, he is discovered dead, the victim of an atrocious murder, from all appearances. You are found in the same cabin, wounded, just recovering your senses. The matter can be explained in only two ways. Either you were hurt in murdering Arthur Ovelman, or else shot and left for dead by the assassin."

"I never laid so much as the weight o' my little finger onto him!" muttered the foreman, still doggedly.

"Who did, then?" impatiently cried the gambler, his grip tightening. "You must know—and by the Lord above! you've got to tell everything, or I'll fit the noose around your throat with my own hands! Come! which shall it be?"

One glance around him Tim Toplift cast. There could be no mistaking the sentiments of the crowd. There was death in every eye—death in every face upon which his eyes rested, and then his nerve failed him.

"I didn't want to do it, but he can't blame me whe it comes to this!" he muttered, shrinking away from those threatening glances. "He treated me like a dog—an' me workin' my four bones clean off—"

"In one word—will you confess?" demanded the gambler.

"Tain't confessin', fer I didn't hev nothin' to do with the job," trembled the foreman. "But I'll tell ye the bull story, though it's like tearin' the heart out o' my body—"

"Better that than having your neck stretched, if you are really innocent," interposed the gambler, with a hard laugh. "Must I question you, or will you tell your story of your own accord?"

"Let me reel it off my own way. It's hard enough, at the best," was the sullen response.

"Very good—but mind: this is your last chance. If we catch you tripping, I'll step aside and let these gentlemen try what virtue there is in a dose of hemp."

"Give me a drink, then, somebody. I'm chokin' as it is!"

A glass of liquor was brought from the bar, and hastily swallowing it, Tim Toplift plunged headlong into his story, as though eager to get through with a painful task.

"Last night, while I an' some o' the boys was on guard duty over the Girl, we was jumped by Cap'n Slyboots an' his gang o' Anti Monopolists, as they call themselves. Lucky fer us, they didn't ketch us nappin', an' though two of the boys chawed cold lead an' was throwed in thar tracks, we fit the pizen imps off—"

"What has this to do with the murder of Arthur Ovelman?"

"You said fer me to tell the bull story, arter my own fashion, an' I'm doin' it the best I know how," sullenly retorted Toplift, showing his teeth. "That was part o' the job, though you mayn't think so, jest now."

"All right—fire ahead. But don't try our patience any more than you can help."

"We fit 'em off, though we couldn't be sure that they wasn't layin' 'round under kiver ready fer to snake us in the minnit we showed our noses out o' the hole," doggedly resumed the witness, closely adhering to the line which he had laid out. "But when the sun got 'fell up, an' we couldn't make out anythin' o' the gang, I made a break fer it, to tell the boss how matters hed gone."

"I got through all right, as ye know, fer ye seed me come into town this mornin', when ye were havin' things lively enough—but that don't matter to my story."

"I told the boss what had happined, an' he rid with me out o' town, but when I tried to tell him what all hed happined, he jest shut me up mighty short, an' said that he wanted to think—an' ef looks don't lie, he was doin' a powerful sight o' thinkin', too!"

"All the same, he led the way at a good gait, an' when he tuck the wrong turn at the forks, an' I minded him of it, he turned onto me right savagerous, sayin' that he knowed his own business best."

"I reckon he see that I was kinder hurt at his rough way o' speakin', when I hedn't meant to cross his notions in any way, fer he looked back with that pleasant smile o' his, an' said that he was 'spectin' word from down kentry, that mornin', an' that he'd hear all I hed to say when

we come to the place whar the man was to meet him."

"We halted at the shanty whar these boys found me an'—an' the corpus," hesitating over the choice of a word, but then continuing more rapidly:

"I told the boss all that had happined at the Girl, an' he jest listened, not sayin' so much as a word. I could see that he wasn't in his usual mood, an' so held my hush ontel the notion should strike him to open out. An' so we sot thar ontel past noon, when the man he was lookin' fer come along."

"It was a clean stranger to me—don't reckon he'd ever bin in them parts afore, though he come in as cool as though he'd lived thar all his life, an' handed the boss a letter without sayin' a word."

"The boss opened an' read it, an' his face turned as white an' sickly lookin' as that of a ghost. I think he was goin' to keel over, an' jumped to ketch him, but he turned on me with a sick-lookin' smile, an' motioned me back. Then him an' the stranger went outside, leavin' me in the cabin, though I moved so I could keep a eye onto them, fer I didn't like the look o' the strange cuss, overly much, an' thunk mebbe he 'lowed to play some sort o' gum-game onto the boss."

"They talked fer a bit, then the boss writ somethin' an' give it to the stranger, who jest nodded an' turned away. I could hear the trompin' o' his boss's feet, an' knowed by that that he'd gone back whar he come from."

"The boss come inside an' writ a letter, sealin' it up afore he putt it in my han's, tellin' me to ride hot-foot to town an' give it to Arthur Ovelman. I was to wait fer a answer, an' ef he wanted to come with me, I was to fetch him straight to the shanty, whar the boss would be waitin'."

"I did jest as he told me. The old gent read the letter, an' questioned me mighty close, seemin' to think that thar was some sort o' trick kivered up in it, but then he looked satisfied, an' we rid out o' town together. I tuck him straight to the shanty, as I was told. He rid on a little ahead, as I p'inted it out, an' got down off his critter."

Toplift's voice was growing more husky and uncertain as he proceeded, and now he came to a pause, wetting his parched lips with his tongue. St. Clair Guthrie made a gesture, and one of his employees handed the witness a glass of liquor. He swallowed it down at a gulp, then resumed his narrative, speaking more rapidly, as though fearful of his own courage.

"The old gent stepped in the house, and then I seed him stumble, as I thought, but at the same time he give a cry of what mought 'a' been warnin' to me, but I didn't think what it meant then—an' then come a shot, an' I tumbled out o' the saddle!"

Again Toplift paused, a flush of color coming into his face, which deepened as St. Clair Guthrie, sternly demanded:

"Who was it that fired that shot?"

"It was a man," slowly. "I jest ketched a glimps' o' him afore the bullet knocked me over. Not enough to swar to him."

"But afterward? Come, Toplift," and there was a menacing glitter in those cold orbs as the gambler spoke, "you're in a tight box, and there's only one way to clear yourself. Arthur Ovelman has been murdered, and we have sworn to avenge his death. One of two things: Either you murdered him for the large sum of money which he carried on his person, or you know who the criminal is. We are determined to learn the whole truth. If you refuse to speak, we will string you up by the throat until you confess—or die! Take your choice!"

The color faded from the face of the foreman, and he broke into a harsh, discordant laugh, muttering, as though to himself:

"He brung it onto himself! What made him treat me like a no-count dog, fer? He didn't give me a show, an' I'd be a bloody fool to swing on his a-count!"

"Come!" impatiently added St. Clair Guthrie. "Time is pressing. Will you speak out of your own free will, or must we see what the persuasion of a close-fitting noose will do?"

"I'll tell all I know," suddenly, "but don't crowd a feller too hard. It's a pizen nasty dose to swallow, as it is. Nur I wouldn't go back onto him, though you fetched on a cord o' trail-ropes, ef he hedn't went back on me fust!"

"Never mind your reasons. We want the truth, and don't care how we get at it, nor your reasons for telling it."

"I jest ketched a glimps' o' the man who shot, afore I tumbled out o' the saddle, but, as I said, it wasn't enough fer me to photograph him, jest then. I wasn't killed, as ye know, though it was a mighty cluss call, fer the lead struck me low enough down to hev bored my brain-pan, ef it hedn't glanced like, skinnin' 'round the skull an' comin' out on top o' my nut. Wilkins, thar, kin tell ye ef I'm lyin'."

"It's jest as he says, gents," put in the man appealed to. "I tied up his head, an' ort to know."

"What has that got to do with the murder?" impatiently interposed St. Clair Guthrie. "Get down to business."

"Ain't it business—an' that o' the pi'zenest kind? I ain't a-goin' to make a botch o' it now I've got started. I want to show how it come that—that he left a witness to tell o' his doin's," doggedly retorted Toplift, licking his dry lips. "That hole in my forehead, an' the way I was bloodied, mought 'a' fooled a smarter man than him—ef they make any more sech."

"Go on," growled the gambler, resignedly.

"I couldn't move ary limb, no more'n ef I was paralyzed, but all the time my thinkin' traps was workin' as bright as ever. I know it don't sound right, but it's the gospel truth, all the same. I could see the man what shot me come outside, an' knowed that he was comin' to make sure that I was dead, but to save my soul I couldn't move a finger or utter a sound. I jest laid thar, like a dead hog, an' he come up, felt o' my heart an' my pulse, then laughed a little, low an' soft, as he lifted me up in his arms an' tuck me into the shanty."

"He drapped me down in one corner, then turned to whar the old gent was layin'. I see'd it all, like a man in a dream, but it was so terrible plain that I kin sbet my eyes now an' go over every move that was made, little an' big."

"I see him stoop over an' run his knife into the old gent's buzzum, clean to the hilt. Then he stopped a minnit, lookin' at him. Then he tuck a bun'le o' somethin'—I cain't jest sw'ar what it was, fer he stood between us, an' hed his back part turned to'ards me—out o' the old gent's breast-pocket, an' stuck it into his own. He did it quick as thought, an' at the same time cussed a little, as though he hed diskivered some signs o' life—that, I reckon, fer he stooped ag'in an' drew his knife across the old gent's throat, so hard an' fierce, like, that it almost cut his head clean off!"

"Then he turned to'rds me, grippin' his knife, his eyes shinin' like balls o' fire in the dark—fer it was gettin' on to'rds sundown, an' ye know that thar hain't no winders in the shanty. I thunk he was goin' to slit my wizen the same as he did that o' the old gent, an' I tried to holler out fer marcy, but I couldn't make a sound—couldn't move a finger or toe, even—an' I reckon it was lucky fer me that was so!"

"He stooped over me, an' felt fer my heart, jest like he did outside, but thar wasn't no sign o' life, an' he turned away ag'in, leavin' me layin' thar. He went outdoors, an' I could hear the tromple o' his hoss's hoofs as he rid away."

"Who was it?" demanded St. Clair Guthrie, sternly. "You have not told his name, yet! Who was the foul assassin?"

"I ain't done, yic," doggedly. "I lay thar, with that orful sight afore my eyes, fer what seemed a year. The dark come down into the cabin, but it couldn't shet out the sight o' the dead man, an' I wouldn't wish my wust enemy to suffer one hafe o' what I suffered thar afore I learn the sound o' human voices outside, an' Wilkins come stumblin' inside. They was skereed at the dead man, an' when I thunk they was runnin' away, leavin' me thar in wuss then hell, ten times over, it give me power to break the spell, an' I called to 'em. They holped me down here—an' you know the rest."

"All save the name of the murderer—"

"An' that you'd never know from me, only he went back onto me fust, an' shot me like I was a dog! I'll tell, though it cuts mighty deep, even now, fer, gents, I loved the critter like he was my own son—I did so!" huskily muttered Toplift.

"Once more—his name!" demanded the gambler, his revolver touching the face of the foreman. "Speak—and quickly."

"The man who killed Arthur Ovelman, an' tried to kill me, was Dan Brown o' Denver!" slowly said Toplift.

Although they had suspected something of the sort, from what the witness had said before, this announcement caused an intense excitement among the crowd, but silence reigned in obedience to the uplifted hand of St. Clair Guthrie.

"Gentlemen—one word! You are not more astonished than I at the announcement of the murderer's name. I would not have believed it, on less positive evidence—for we all saw that it was like denouncing his brother for Toplift to say what he has. More than ever I regret having taken a prominent part in this affair, for there are those who will remember that only last evening I had a little dispute with Dan Brown. For that reason I resign the position which was, in a measure, forced upon me, and beg you to elect some one else whom you can trust, to lead you on to vengeance—"

"No, no! you're the man!" came from the crowd.

"Very well! and the blue eyes flashed fire. "I will take the lead, and I swear to avenge the murder of Arthur Ovelman! Clear the room of all save those I name, for the present. There is no more time to waste if we hope to catch him!"

CHAPTER XX.

A MIDNIGHT VISIT.

MARJEAN OVELMAN sat in her chamber, that night, little dreaming of the terrible fate which had overtaken her stern parent, though it may be safely said that she alone of all the living

souls in Rocky Bar remained in ignorance of the truth as wrung so reluctantly from the lips of Timothy Toplift.

She had scarcely stirred limb or muscle since Arthur Ovelman locked the door behind him and hastened away to meet his doom. Her head was drooping upon her bosom, her burning, tearless eyes staring vacantly at the floor. She took no note of the passage of time. The knock at her door, and the intimation that supper was waiting, were alike unheeded. The hours dragged heavily along, and still she sat thus, thinking, thinking, the sad past moving in detail before her heated brain in unvarying succession, like some endless panorama, beginning anew where it should have left off.

It is hours such as these that unsettle the brain and create maniacs. The marvel is that the poor girl had lived through so many without utterly losing her reason.

As one in a dream she heard soft footsteps just without her door, and then a key turning in the lock. She knew that the door opened, that some person entered the room, but she supposed it was her father, returned from his ride to meet Dan Brown of Denver, and she changed not her despondent attitude in the least. Never before had she felt so utterly worn out, in mind and body; never before so little inclined to meet and combat his threats or persuasions, and hoping vaguely that he would retreat and leave her unmolested, at least for that night, she sat motionless as a statue of marble.

For a few moments all was silence, but then came the faint, crackling sound of a match being struck against the wall, and the ghostly light which the moon cast in through the partially drawn curtains was overcome as a candle was lighted and placed upon the little table at her elbow.

Impatiently she turned her head, but the words died upon her lips—a hot flush leaped into her face, only to fade as swiftly, leaving her countenance paler than before.

The intruder was not her father. The candle shone upon the same face which she had seen under the moonlight one night ago, lying along the steaming haunch of the black bull—the same face which had stared at her in cold surprise when she begged and prayed at the feet of the man who wore it—the face of Kyrle Dando, of Nor' West Nick!

"You seem surprised, Marjean," he said, leaning on the table and gazing fixedly into her widely distended eyes, his own blue orbs glittering vividly, a peculiar smile upon his handsome face. "And yet, why should you be. Surely you knew that we must meet again, face to face, when there were none to overhear our conversation, or interfere in any way."

His voice was so soft, so gentle, so like it had been in the long ago, before the black clouds came over their horizon, that it was only by biting her lips until her white teeth were tinged with carmine, by clenching her hands until the nails buried themselves in the flesh, that Marjean could refrain from rising and flinging herself upon his neck, from relieving her brain by bursting into tears upon his bosom.

But in her ears were still ringing those cruel words—words which had haunted her constantly ever since they fell upon her with such stunning force—and she made no motion to arise, looking straight into his eyes, scarce breathing.

"You know me, Marjean?" he softly breathed, a tenderer light coming into his eyes, and his hands stretching toward her as though involuntarily.

The spell was broken. With a low, gasping cry, she rose and flung herself upon his bosom. His arms wound around her, his mustached lips pressed a passionate kiss upon hers—then, with a hard, cruel laugh, he loosened her arms and pushed her coldly, almost violently from him.

"Kyrle—my Kyrle—what have I done?" the poor woman faltered, supporting her trembling form by leaning against the table, to the opposite side of which he retreated, as though afraid to trust himself nearer.

"What have you not done, rather!" he grated, the smile gone, the soft light in his blue eyes growing hard and merciless as he spoke with rapidity. "You have proved yourself my curse from the moment I first set eyes upon your fair, false face. You have dragged my name in the dust and mire. You have ruined my entire life and destroyed my future—have made me an outcast and a branded felon—and yet you can ask that?"

Marjean reeled as though his clinched fist had been dashed into her face. The wild, haunted look came back into her eyes. One trembling hand sought her brow, the other was pressed against her convulsively throbbing heart.

"I had hoped that our life trails would never cross each other again—I even prayed that they might not, for fear I should forget that you wear the shape which my dead mother wore, and in remembering my wrongs, strike to the earth the woman I once loved so madly!"

"In this hope, I kept far away from the old home, but the fates were against me. You came, and tried once more the cunning arts that proved so successful with me in the days gone by, caring nothing for the vulgar crowd around, perhaps enjoying the eagerness with

which they drank in your words and gloated over your disheveled beauty—for you are still a beauty—beautiful as Lucifer before he fell!"

A mocking laugh lent an additional sting to his bitter words, and the poor woman flinched as though he had stabbed her to the heart. Her blanched lips moved, but not a sound issued from their portals.

"Shall I go over the whole story?" he added, with a smile that was almost satanic in its cruel hardness. "Shall I repeat the amusing tale of the silly moth who so hopelessly scorched his wings? Bah! you know it all better than I can tell it, even if I could trust myself. You know that you urged me on into deeper speculation, that I might the sooner win the right to demand your hand in marriage. I believed that you were in earnest, then—as much in love as it lay in your heartless, soulless disposition to be. You see I am willing to do you justice, for all you showed me scant mercy when I stumbled and fell in the race you incited. I believe you loved me then, but you loved wealth and luxury more, and when the crash came, you thought only of clearing yourself from the ruins in the shortest, surerest manner. That was in getting rid of me forever, and in accomplishing this, you committed perjury of the blackest sort. I could have covered you with shame and obloquy, but I still had a heart, then; I was still under the accursed spell of your beauty, and like an idiot, I destroyed my sole weapon. I ruined my whole future, rather than show you to the world as you really were; but the deed was hardly committed before I bitterly regretted it, and when you dared to visit me in my cell, where I lay in waiting for the coming of those who were to take me to my living grave, with tears and wailing in your eyes and upon your tongue—then I showed you that the scales had at last fallen from my eyes, for good and all."

"I escaped, thanks to a woman whom you would have loftily glanced at in silent scorn—Bah!" with a hard laugh, interrupting himself. "Why go on? It is enough that I escaped the living death you and your father devised—that I changed my identity as best I could, and came out here where people are not too inquisitive, provided they see a man carries weapons and looks as though he knew how to use them if crowded too closely."

He paused, wiping his lips with a handkerchief whose subtle perfume was wafted to the dilating nostrils of the woman. It seemed to restore the strength which had deserted her in that moment of cruel repulsion, and the stupefied look left her face, though she was still as pale as a corpse.

"If you believe all this, why have you come to me now?"

"Not to kneel at your feet and sigh out my love, as in those days of old," he said, with a cold laugh. "I came here to-night to sip my first draught of revenge—"

"On an unarmed, unprotected, helpless woman? Truly you are altered! You said well when you claimed to have forever lost your identity as the Kyrle Dando whom I used to know!"

An angry light flashed into the blue eyes.

"What I am, you made me, Marjean Ovelman! You know what I was in those days; I will tell you what I am now, that you may the better appreciate your work."

"You have heard of the notorious road agent, called Captain Slyboots? Well, he and I are one and the same. I am a professional robber and cut-throat. I make my living by stopping the mails and confiscating them. By stealing cattle and horses when no higher game offers itself. I have killed my man, not once, but scores of times, both in open fight, man to man, and from an ambush, like the most cowardly of assassins."

"Why do you tell me all this?" demanded Marjean, with a firmness of nerve that was really remarkable in one so sorely tried. "Why take so much pains to blacken yourself?"

"That you may the more readily believe what I have in reserve," was the swift response. "I said that I came here to taste my first draught of vengeance, but I was wrong. That has already come to pass. Your father has not yet returned, has he?"

There was a truly satanic light in the blue eyes that stared so triumphantly into hers, and a feeling of terror seized the poor girl. Her lips parted to utter a shriek, but swift as thought the right hand of the outlaw shot out and his palm covered her mouth, while he hissed:

"Silence! Utter a sound louder than I am speaking now, and the blood of a score of innocent beings will be upon your head! I told you that I am Captain Slyboots. I did not come here unprepared for hot work, if such should become necessary. My good band bore me company. They are stationed all around this building. At the first alarm they have my orders to strike swift and sure—to kill all who attempt to make any trouble—to fire the hotel, and to see that not a living soul save their chief leaves it!"

There was a deadly earnestness in the voice which uttered these swift sentences that carried conviction with it, and trembling with horror, Marjean ceased to struggle.

With a short, mocking laugh, she was released.

"You have your warning; disobey it at your peril. Neither Heaven nor man can save you from the punishment I have marked out for you, and as the first installment—listen:

"Until you made that appeal to me last night I had not the faintest idea that you were here, nor that the man of money whom I had marked down, through my spies, as my game, was Arthur Ovelman. So long a time had passed since my trial and conviction on your evidence, that I fancied the old sore was fairly healed—but I soon saw my mistake, and even while I was coldly denying you, I was swearing vengeance on you both.

"As you had stung me deepest, I resolved that you should suffer the bitterest torture, and so I aimed my first blow at your father. I confided my purpose to Dan Brown, with whom I had had dealings as Nor' West Nick, and he readily fell in with my plans, and together we carried them out, so far as Arthur Ovelman was concerned.

"That story of the mine being attacked by Captain Slyboots and his band was all false, concocted simply to draw your father into a snare. I knew that he was shrewd and suspicious, and I baited the trap with care. You know how he swallowed it—now I'll tell you what effect it had on him.

"Tim Toplift was our ally, though it was our purpose to dispose of him as soon as he had done the work laid out for him, not to have the secret known to too many. He brought the note here, and delivered it. Your father was suspicious, but Tim played his part well, seeming indifferent whether your father bore him company back or not, and the old fox yielded.

"Tim conducted him into the snare. Dan Brown met him there, and struck him down—Beware!" he hissed, as he drew a knife and held the glittering point to the breast of the horror-stricken woman. "Utter a single cry, and you seal not only your own fate, but that of all who attempt to aid you!"

This brutal precaution was hardly necessary, for Marjean could not utter a sound. Her limbs failed her, and she would have fallen to the floor, only for the quick sweep of the outlaw's strong arm which encircled her waist. He lowered her into the chair, then, standing close before her, seeing that though in a stupor, so far as her bodily powers were concerned, she could comprehend his words, he mercilessly continued:

"You took alarm too soon, my precious," with a malignant laugh. "Your dear parent was not killed—just then," and he laughed again as the new-born light of hope was quenched in those lustrous eyes.

"Tim Toplift was to be disposed of before he recovered from his surprise, and Dan Brown was not a man to slight any job to which he set his hand. A bullet bored Tim's brain, and Dan dragged him into the cabin where your father lay. Then Brown used his knife—sent it home to the hilt in your father's heart," slowly uttered the outlaw, closely watching his victim, ready to check any outcry, should her horror allow her to make the attempt.

But not a sound escaped her blanched lips. Her eyes were full of unutterable horror, but she was powerless to give it audible utterance. A frightful spell seemed to weight her down. Truly Kyrle Dando was taking his revenge!

"Dan Brown secured the money which Arthur Ovelman took with him to pay for the Jealous Girl, and in doing so, he detected signs of life still lingering, and to make all sure, he used his knife once more, cutting your father's throat from ear to ear. And he lies there now, in that lone cabin, a significant testimonial of the manner in which Kyrle Dando pays his debts!"

The outlaw paused, as though to witness and gloat over the agony which his horrible story must certainly cause the helpless daughter, but to his amazement, a smile slowly crept over that pale face, and a strange look came into her eyes.

He bit his lips to keep down a fierce curse, for he began to fear that he had gone too far—that the brain of his victim had given way beneath the terrible blows which he had dealt in such swift succession. There was not a gleam of mercy in his heart, but he was not ready to end all thus. His deep-laid plans were but partly carried out, and he needed the aid of Marjean before complete success could crown his efforts.

His chagrin, if not his surprise, was relieved as Marjean spoke, her voice clear and steady, betraying neither fear nor the grief which would seem but natural.

"Why do you take the trouble to come and tell me all this, when you must know that I will denounce you—that I will spare no pains to bring you to justice for your crimes?"

"You will never have the chance to do that!" was the swift response. "You will not live to tell of me. Your tongue swore away my honor; it shall never have the chance to swear away my life!"

"You mean to murder me, then?" and there was not the slightest tremor in her voice, not the faintest shadow of fear on her pale face or in the dark eyes which were riveted upon his

with an intensity that caused a curious sensation, not altogether unlike fear, to creep over him.

What was the cause of this sudden and complete change? Had she some hidden resource of which he knew nothing? And as the thought flashed across his brain, the outlaw cast a keen, searching glance around the chamber. Nothing suspicious met his gaze. Not a sound came to his ears telling that other than they twain were awake in the hotel. What could it mean?

The smile had deepened upon the face of the woman as he turned to her once more, and because he could not understand its meaning, it cut him all the deeper, making him more savage.

"Murder you? Yes—but by inches, not all at once!" he grated, fiercely. "I have sworn that you shall suffer full as much agony as you were the cause of my enduring, and I mean to keep my word. I'll cut out your tongue if I can't keep you from betraying me in any other way. I'll cripple your wrists so that you cannot put your charges in writing. Or, still better than that, I will bring back the mad love which I know you once felt for me, and then, when you are ready to perjure yourself in my favor, quite as readily as you once did to my injury—then I will lap the cream of my revenge!"

A low, mocking laugh from the strange woman cut him short.

"You are laying your plans far ahead, Captain Slyboots—I believe you claimed that honorable title?"

"What has got into you?" he demanded, savagely. "Have you gone crazy? Have you heard all that I told you? Do you know that your father—curse him! even in his grave!—is dead, killed through my agency, if not by my own hands?"

"I heard all that you said, but it does not trouble me in the least," was the quiet response. "Because I know that you are lying, in this, as in all the rest you have spoken!"

He stared at her in mute amazement for a moment, then a grim smile curled his mustaches.

"Hug that delusion to your breast, my precious, if it gives you any comfort. Time will tell which is right."

"You said that you were Captain Slyboots?"

"I did; and I repeat it now. But you will never tell any person of what I have confessed—be sure of that!"

"It is joy enough for me to know that you speak the truth in this respect," was the reply, while her eyes glowed. "Ha! ha! fool! you have overreached yourself at last! You were not content when your end was fairly won, but you must press your advantage still further, and in doing so you have opened my eyes to a truth glad as heaven itself."

"What do you mean, Marjean?" he demanded, with another uneasy glance around him.

"That you may be Captain Slyboots, as you claim—that you may be the foul assassin, robber, thief—but you are not Kyrle Dando—not the man whom I loved—whom I still love!" cried Marjean, her face fairly radiant, her eyes glowing.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE GIANT AND HIS MASTER.

THE outlaw stared at her, thoroughly puzzled. Had her overtaken brain given way? Was this the shape her madness had assumed? Was he to find himself foiled, just as it seemed that perfect success in his cunning and deep-laid schemes was assured?

All in a jumble these queries flashed through the brain of the outlaw as the woman confronted him so boldly, laughing in his very face, her own wearing a look of triumph and joy quite beyond his powers of comprehension, and he grasped her arm with brutal force as he hissed through his clinched teeth:

"What do you mean by that? Or is it only a crazy freak? Ha!" as a fresh suspicion flashed athwart his busy brain. "You are trying to trick me—trying to play crazy and frighten me out of my plans! But it won't work, my lady—it won't work!"

"Better for you if that was truth—better if I were really mad—for then your secret might have remained such! But now—I know you have been lying to me! You are not the man whom I loved—whom I still love, more madly than ever! The wonderful resemblance deceived me at first, but my eyes are open now—"

"Indeed?" sneered the outlaw, recovering his wonted audacity and coolness as by magic. "Since you know so much, pray tell me who I really am?"

"A liar, coward, villain—beyond that I can't say."

Captain Slyboots showed his white, even teeth beneath his pointed mustaches as the dauntless woman flung these epithets at him, fearlessly meeting his fiery, threatening gaze.

"All these—and yet you deny that I am your old lover, Kyrle Dando?" he laughed, mockingly.

"I deny it—yes! For a time I was deceived, but as I listened to your cruel lies, as I looked into your face to see how such a frightful trans-

formation had been wrought in the gentle, honest man whom I once knew, I penetrated the cunning mask you wore—I knew you were not Kyrle Dando, but an impostor who had assumed his name for some vile purpose!"

"Terribly audacious in me, was it not?" asked the outlaw, with a mocking laugh. "But pray tell me how I made the slip? If not Kyrle Dando, who am I?"

"As I looked into your face, I missed something," slowly uttered Marjean, with a fixed gaze. "Something that Kyrle Dando would carry to the grave with him—the scar on his left temple, from the hurt he received on the day we first met—received by him in saving my life, almost at the cost of his own."

For a moment the outlaw stared into her face, as though doubting the truth of what she said, but then, with a low, angry snarl, he leaped forward and clasped her form in his arms.

"Curse you! you know too much, now! But you'll never squeal! I've gone too far to retreat. If worse comes of it, blame yourself for not keeping a closer tongue betwixt your teeth—for facing your cards before the pot was closed!"

Marjean realized the mistake she had made in thus openly revealing the wonderful discovery she had made, but too late to avert the consequences. The iron grip of the outlaw closed upon her, stifling the cry which rose in her throat, before it could find birth. Pressing her backward to the bed, he tore therefrom a dark blanket and wrapped it tightly around her head and shoulders, knotting the ends together.

Still holding her firmly, he took up the candle and made a few quick motions with it before the curtained window, then blew out the dim light and cast the candle upon the bed.

Bending his head close to the nearly smothered woman, he hissed:

"Utter a sound—make the slightest resistance, and I solemnly swear I'll drive my knife home to your heart, though I stretch hemp for the deed the next minute! Be sensible, and your life is safe. I only warn once."

There could come no audible answer through those smothering folds, nor did the outlaw wait for one. Lowering her to the floor, he hastily produced a light but strong rope-ladder from about his waist, and unrolling it, fastened one end to the inner window-sill, flinging the other outside. A faint whistle came up from the shadow at the base of the building, telling him that his signal had been seen and understood.

Catching up the motionless form of Marjean Ovelman, he rested it across his shoulder, slipping through the window and rapidly descending to the ground, where a tall form was steadily the ladder.

"Let it hang where it is," muttered the outlaw. "It will give the citizens something to gossip over in the morning, and throw them on the wrong scent. Lead the way, home, by the rear, and keep all eyes open for snags. Give me timely warning, or so much the worse for your hide!"

Silently the tall form glided away in the shadows, as noiselessly followed by the outlaw bearing his now insensible burden. Keeping out of the main street, dodging through the obscure byways, a house near the extreme southern end of the oblong valley was at length reached.

"Wait here until I give the word whether I want you for anything more or not," muttered the kidnapper, pausing on the threshold and rapping in a peculiar order upon the closed door with his knuckles.

A brief spell of waiting, then the barrier swung open, and he stepped inside, greeted by a little exclamation as of surprise or annoyance.

"Lock and bar, then strike a light. No time to talk, now!" he said, roughly, loosening the tightly-gathered folds of the blanket from around the face of his victim.

In silence he was obeyed, but then, as the light of an oil lamp made things visible, it revealed the face of a woman, darkly beautiful, but now rendered almost repulsive by the mad jealousy with which it was filled.

"Who is that? Why do you bring her here, without giving me my walking-papers?" she demanded, almost savagely, as she bent forward and glared into the white, deathlike countenance which rested against the shoulder of the outlaw.

"Don't be a fool, Belle!" he muttered, showing his teeth. "This is business, not a mash. There's big money in it, if we play our cards right. I'll need your help, I reckon, so don't let your infernal jealousy get the better of you."

Roughly, impatiently as he spoke, the woman appeared satisfied. With one hand resting lightly upon his shoulder, she reached up and pressed her red lips to his.

"I was a fool, Saint. But you can't blame me. I have no claim on you, other than what my blind love gives me, and when I saw you bring a woman here—and one as lovely as a marble statue, at that—wasn't it natural that I should be jealous? You hadn't given me a hint of what to expect—but it's all right now. Tell me what I am to do, and I'll do it."

"I didn't expect to fetch her here myself,"

with a hard laugh, "so you are not the only one taken by surprise. But I'll explain it all after a bit. Take her to your room and see if you can bring her around. It will be a nasty turn, on more accounts than one, should she slip off the hooks just now. Do your best, and you'll be no loser, old girl."

Without a word the woman took the insensible form up in her arms and left the room. For a minute he stared with a dark frown at the door through which she had vanished, and, handsome though he confessedly was, just then St. Clair Guthrie was not a pleasant object to contemplate.

He had played a bold game, and though it looked as though success had crowned his efforts thus far, he knew better. Utter defeat stared him in the face, and he knew that only the most skillful playing could save him from even worse.

"To slip up like this, when I was so sure I had the game won to a dead certainty!" he muttered, the ugly light growing more vivid in his blue eyes. "I thought I knew every card in the pack, but in that cursed scar she held one that knocked my calculations west-end-and-crooked! So much the worse for her!" and he showed his teeth in a vicious snarl. "I'll change the combination for a fresh deal, though it doubles the risk and undoes more than half my work so far."

He bit off his speech with a savage curse, then unlocked the door and uttered a low whistle. A moment later the tall shadow which had accompanied him from the hotel came forward, and the light of the lamp changed it into the tall claimant for the honors attached to the title of Nor' West Nick.

"Come in. I want to have a few words with you," sharply uttered St. Clair Guthrie, stepping aside to admit the giant, then closing and locking the door behind them. "Sit down."

With a craven, uneasy air, the giant obeyed, and the two men confronted each other across the little round table.

"You came to me in answer to a dispatch for a man of nerve, of cunning and address. Your recommendations were good, and I relied on you to accomplish the work I had in view when I took the trouble to send for you. You promised well at our first interview. You swore that the job was as good as done, and I, like a fool, believed you. Now—how has it turned out? A wretched botch from beginning to end!"

"Was I all to blame?" muttered the giant, sullenly. "Didn't I play the part you told me, all right?"

"At the beginning—yes: because there was no chance for you to bungle it. I gave you the money to rig yourself out, and to make the bet. A bigger coward than ever stood in Dan Brown's boots would have taken you up, before that crowd. But you let him get the better of you in every way. Then came that cursed red-horned fellow! Who is he?"

"I'll never tell ye!" with a shrug of the shoulders. "I never clapped my two eyes onto him afore he come splurgin' in an' lay claim to the same name I tuck. How'd I know but what he was the real Nor' West Nick? Was it anyways strange that it sorter knocked me off my feet?"

"No," admitted St. Clair Guthrie, in a less sharp tone. "I was quite as much demoralized as you, and though I tried to see an excuse for dropping the fellow before matters grew any worse, I let that infernal Dan Brown get ahead of me, and to save my own carcass I drew out of the game for that hand. But you're positive you can't place the fellow?"

"Dead sure! He ain't a critter any one could fergit in a hurry when oncet spotted. I thought I had a soft thing when they sot us up forninst each other with the mauleys, but ef it was pie, thar was a right smart sprinklin' o' kyann pepper atween the crusts!" with a hard laugh that was anything but mirthful. "I did the best I knowed. I pounded the cuss as I never afore was called on to thump a human critter, but it was like tryin' to make rails out of a sycamore log with a wedge o' cake an' a sponge fer a maul! Ef he ain't the devil, with his horns turned to red ha'r an' sot a little lower then common, then I give it up as too knotty fer me to wrastle down!" declared Nichols, with a slow wag of his shaggy pate.

"Never mind. I don't care so much for him as for the other fellow who claims the name of Nor' West Nick. Have you any idea who he really is?"

"The 'riginal Jacobs, I reckon," and as he spoke, Nichols cast a covert glance into the face of the gambler from beneath his shaggy eyebrows, as though to read his belief.

"You may be right," was the slow response. "But whoever he is, he is in my way, and must be got out of it, by fair means or foul. And I count on you to do the job!"

The giant shifted uneasily on his seat, clearly not relishing the turn which the conversation had taken.

"It won't be so easy," he muttered. "The critter is chain-lightnin' biled down! I'd rather tackle the red cuss ag'in."

"I don't ask you to take the job—I order you!"

"All right—ef ye putt it in that shape," doggedly.

"I do—but at the same time, I mean to pay you in proportion to the risk involved. You know the bet you made with Dan Brown! The stakes are in my hands, and I furnished you with the cash to put up. The whole amount shall be yours, the moment you prove to me beyond all doubt that this man—this Nor' West Nick, as he terms himself—is dead."

Nichols rubbed the tip of his nose thoughtfully.

"That sounds mighty ginerous, an' I ain't hintin' but what it is jest as free-handed as it sounds, but what about Dan Brown, boss? Reckon he'd kick, wouldn't he?"

"Kick he will, beyond a doubt!" laughed St. Clair Guthrie with a malignancy that caused the blood of the hardened ruffian who sat opposite to turn a shade colder. "But it will be kicking against empty air, at the end of a rope. Don't you borrow trouble, my friend. Dan Brown will never lay claim to any portion of those stakes. He may return to Rocky Bar—he will return, I may say, but it will only be to meet death! I've insured that. He will hang higher than Haman!"

"They got to take him on the jump, then, or thar'll be more funerals in town than his," with a grim laugh. "I don't lay claim to bein' a coward, but when that circus comes off, ef I hev to see it, I want to look on from abind a stump big enough to be bullet-proof—you hear me talk?"

"Never mind Dan Brown. I'll take care of him. You have other business to think of. Wipe out this Nick o' the West, and the money is yours. But you don't want to lose any time. Only make sure of your first stroke. You might not get time to put in another. You understand?"

"Chuck-up!" said the giant, rising to his feet. "I'll take the trail at oncet, an' when sun-up comes, boss, thar'll be a cold corpus fer you to look at—an' I'll take the ducats in out o' the wet!"

"See that you're not the meat for the mourners, then!" said the gambler, warningly, as he unlocked and opened the door.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE GAMBLER STOCKS HIS CARDS.

WITH this significant warning, St. Clair Guthrie closed the door behind his gigantic tool, and returning to the table, sunk down in a chair, leaning his chin upon his hands, his eyes staring at vacancy.

Not many of the citizens of Rocky Bar would have recognized the face of their prominent sport at first glance, could their eyes have rested upon it just now. The icy mask which he habitually wore was dropped, his face was haggard, and the lines which marked it so deeply made him appear many years older than his most intimate associates of Rocky Bar had ever given him credit for being.

His was a remarkable nerve, but it had been terribly tasked during the last few days, and now when he believed himself free from all danger of observation, St. Clair Guthrie suffered his mask to drop. This unwonted relaxation was to him as grateful as a bath of fresh cold water would be to the weary, worn wanderer through a mighty desert.

How long it lasted he never knew. He seemed like one in a dream, when he was suddenly recalled to himself by the faint sound of a human breath—almost a sigh—and with the old glittering light flashing back into his blue eyes, he jerked a revolver from his bosom and whirled around—to confront the dark, handsome face of the woman in whose charge he had left Marjean Ovelman.

Her thin, but brilliantly-red lips curled slightly as she unflinchingly met his gaze, and a low laugh parted her white teeth.

"You will not waste a bullet on me, Saint?"

"No—of course not," he muttered, lowering the hammer of his weapon and returning it to its hiding-place. "But I was thinking—half asleep—and you startled me."

"You flatter me, Saint," with a peculiar laugh. "That is more than the best man in Rocky Bar could do, as I've heard others besides yourself say, more than once. Surely you are not beginning to lose your nerve?"

"If I were, it would not be so wonderful," with a grim laugh that came only from his lips.

"I've been playing a lone hand for the heaviest stakes of my life—and that is saying not a little, as you know."

"You will win," confidently commented Belle.

"Either that, or lose—my life!" with a repetition of the ugly laugh. "Come, girl, bring me a bottle of brandy."

"Do you mean it, Saint? You are not throwing up your hand at this stage of the game? You're not going to get drunk?"

"Look here, little one. I can trust you. My brain is overloaded, and I must give it a little relaxation, or it will take it—by giving way entirely. Bring me the brandy. I could drink a barrel without affecting my brain in the least! Or, if it should, there are your drugs; you can concoct a dose to set me on my pins again; easy enough. The brandy—fetch it!"

In silence the woman obeyed him, placing two bottles on the little table—~~a~~ a pair of glasses.

"I will join you, Saint. I don't often feel that way, but somehow I do this evening. Maybe it is the sight of that girl—who knows?" with a short, hard laugh.

The gambler knocked off the head of a bottle with a single swift stroke of the edge of his hand, then filled the glasses with a hand that visibly trembled. As he set the bottle down, he again held up his hand, looking at it curiously, as though the sight was a strange one to his eyes.

"You see, little girl, it was full time for me to loosen the strain. I never saw that before. I thought I was proof—and so I will be when this game is played out. The girl? Oh, you mean Miss Marjean Ovelman! What of her?"

"A strange name, Saint—a stranger face! She has a history, that woman, or my art fails me for the first time."

"What makes you harp on her, all the time?" with a suspicious scowl, as he drank again. "You're not jealous?"

"What good would it do me, if I were?" she asked, her dark brows corrugating, a reddish light coming into her black eyes. "What right have I to be? You are free enough, though I am bound. Your only master is your will. If you have grown tired of me, it is only what I knew would happen as the days crept on. I'll do you justice. You did not try to deceive me. I saw the whole trail before me before I took the first step. And I could see the end of the trail, too. I knew it could come to no different ending, but I cared little then. It would be a long time, and my life-trail might end first—"

"Enough of that!" sharply, rudely muttered the gambler, thumping his glass upon the table. "You are making a mountain out of a mole-hill. Come—I will make a clean breast of it to you, and then you will see how widely you are mistaken. I must do it! I must relieve my brain, or it will fail me just when I need it the most!"

"You know you can trust me, Saint," softly uttered the woman, the long lashes shading her lustrous eyes. "I don't ask it; I have never tried to pry into any of your secrets; but I have often wished that you could bring yourself to trust me. Not through idle curiosity, but because I felt that I could help you win, even if I am only a woman."

"I never needed your help before, but I may now. Anyhow, it will be a relief to talk, to lay bare my plans and show you the cards I hold. You are interested in them, too, for if I win the game, you sha'n't be a loser, old girl."

For a brief space St. Clair Guthrie sat in silence staring at the blank wall opposite, seemingly having forgotten the intention just declared. The woman watched him keenly, covertly, her dark eyes glittering vividly.

"That girl," he said, suddenly, refilling his glass and draining it. "Be very careful of her. She is worth her weight in gold—literally, not figuratively speaking. There's no one to look after her, now, since the old gentleman's turned toes up, and I mean to marry her myself."

"And me?" asked Belle, the question coming with a little catch in her breath. "Of course I am to say good-by?"

"Not if I can persuade you different, little one. You shall remain just what you are now, until I can get her property safe under my control. Then there will be a funeral, and we will head the mourners, you and I."

"And after that?"

"Just as you say. I will marry you the day you set, if that will suit you. We will take our gains, and levant for some healthier clime. I'll retire—sink my identity as St. Clair Guthrie—give the pasteboards the go-by, and settle down to enjoy life with you. How does that strike you, eh?"

"Like a glimpse of heaven!" she murmured, bowing her face upon her trembling hands, but only for a moment. "That will never come to pass, I'm afraid, Saint!"

"With your help it will, my girl," he laughed, his face flushed, his eyes shining. "I tell you it can't possibly fail, and to prove it to your satisfaction, listen:

"You know how I have been fighting Dan Brown—hell's blackest curses cover him from head to foot, now and forever! Fighting him from under cover, because it did not suit my plans to show my hand in the work. But you don't know why I did it—what bitter cause I had to hate him and seek his ruin first, his heart's blood when there was nothing more to gain by letting him live."

"No," was the quiet response. "You are not the man to face your cards before the game is fairly won or lost. I am not a woman, to pry into what is none of my business. So I waited, knowing that you would remember me if ever the time came when you needed my aid."

St. Clair Guthrie, with the subtle fumes of the strong liquor beginning to circle through his brain, gazed curiously into the face of the woman as she spoke. He began to realize that there was far more in her than he had ever suspected; that she was one who might easily become dangerous if such a notion occurred to her.

But the black eyes met his gaze unflinchingly. In their depths he could read naught save fidelity and devotion to him, such as few women are capable of showing.

"I have been blind as a bat for not recognizing your full merit before this, my girl," he said, reaching across the table and clasping her hand, much as he would have shaken that of a trusted man with whom he had just completed an alliance. "It is not too late yet. You shall help me play this hand out, and we will divide the stakes equally."

"Say share them together, Saint—that is better,"—quietly.

"All right. Share it is. But as I was saying—"

"Years ago, Dan Brown dealt me a blow over which he crowed loud enough, little thinking that it sealed his own death, none the less surely because the stroke has been delayed. The full details do not matter; it would make the story too long, and I am not level-headed enough to-night to bear the repetition, even if there was anything to be gained by it."

"It was up in Wyoming. Dan Brown played a double-hand. He stocked the cards, and when the limit was reached he raked the pot. My father and brother were in the game, and through that demon they lost their last stake. Harry was dropped in his tracks as he went in to get even, but my father was taken prisoner, though shot all to pieces. He was strung up, after what they called a trial, but he died game. He was old, his head was white as snow, he had scarcely blood enough left in his veins to breathe above a whisper, but even on the gallows they could not conquer him. When they bade him pray, he laid his curse upon Dan Brown and left a legacy to me—bidding me avenge his death and the death of his son Henry."

"It was nearly a year before the word came to me, for I was far away, working another lead, then, but I buried his legacy in my heart, and set out to find Dan Brown."

"I found him at last, and though I did not forget the vow I had taken, I held my hand for the moment, for I saw that I could do double duty by waiting. I could have killed him time and again, but I had brooded over the death of my kindred for so long that a simple death would not satisfy me. I wanted to find out the soft spots in his heart, and strike him where he would feel it the most acutely, before dealing the finishing stroke."

His voice grew hissing, the great veins started out on his temples, his face flushed hotly, and he seemed choking. He poured out another glass of brandy, then gulped down the powerful liquor.

He turned abruptly toward the woman, who was leaning far over the table, listening eagerly, her dark eyes fairly blazing and her breath suspended. He stared at her fixedly for a moment, a growing suspicion in his eyes. Though he had no excuse for doubting her perfect fidelity, the troubled life he had led from early youth rendered him distrustful even of her.

"Never mind that," he muttered, doggedly. "That part of the game don't concern you at all. The girl is the point."

"I will do all that lies in my power. You should know whether you can trust me or not, by this time."

"I trust nobody, further than my arm can reach!" doggedly. "I will trust you that far, but if you try to play me false, even in thought, I will detect it and strike you to the heart, though you were twice what you have been to me!"

"I'll take the chances, Saint," quietly. "I know you will never strike me without good cause, and that I'll never give you. You are all I have left, now. That should answer you."

"Don't look so infernally eager, then!" he growled. "Your eyes went right through me. Keep them down. They mix me all up, and tangle my brain."

She did as he bade, and he resumed, speaking rapidly.

"You know what happened last night? I mean about those fellows who called themselves Nor' West Nick. One of them was a tool of mine; the others I never met before. Of course one of them must be a fraud, but the man that killed the three cowboys, I believe is the pure quill. If so, he means mischief and I laid a plan to put him out of the way for good and all."

"It happens that we are very much alike, in size, shape and features—but you know that, for you saw him to day."

"I made what few alterations were necessary in my make-up, and aided by our good friend and spy, the colonel, surprised Miss Marjean in her room. It would take too long to tell you all I said and did. Enough that I made her believe I was the fellow whom she called Kyrle Dando, which was not hard, after being told the whole story by Gordon, as he overheard it. I told her that I planned the death of her father; that I was Captain Slyboots; that I was going to torture her, and all that, and was just about giving the signal which would lead my man under the window to raise an alarm, when I would take to my heels and leave her to accuse Nor' West Nick with the crimes which I, as Nor' West Nick, had confessed, when she discovered the cheat, by a lacking mark, or scar, or something of the sort, which the original possessed, and my cake was dough!"

"I did some quick thinking, then, and the result you see. I knew she would denounce me, if she got the chance. Suspicion would be turned on me, so I brought her here, and your suspicions first gave me the idea of marrying her, for the wealth which I know belonged to Arthur Ovelman, her father."

"You acted for the best, and I will do what I can to aid you. My knowledge of drugs will come into good play. That part of it don't bother me at all. But it will be risky. You will have both Dan Brown and Nor' West Nick to fight."

"Nor' West Nick will be ready to lead a funeral procession when the sun comes up. Dan Brown will come back to his death; but come he will, after revenge for the trick—"

"What trick? You haven't told me what you did."

The hand of the gambler shot out and caught her throat, while a knife gleamed viciously in his hand as he hissed:

"What is that to you? Take care! Don't ask too many questions, or show such anxiety on his account, or I'll believe you're his ally, not mine!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE WRONG TRUMP TURNED.

"STRIKE!" cried the woman, her dark eyes flashing luridly as she unflinchingly encountered the gaze of the gambler. "Strike—and kill the best and truest friend you have in the world!"

Had she struggled ever so slightly to free herself, had she winced beneath that fierce grip, or showed the slightest trace of fear, her fate would surely have been sealed then and there. The liquor-maddened gambler would have struck, swift and sure. His overtaken brain was boiling over with insane suspicions. The breathless interest which the woman betrayed in the story he was telling in such a round-about fashion, seemed to him an evidence of his faithlessness. He felt that she was trying to probe all his most dangerous secrets to the bottom, only to turn around and sell him to his bitter enemies. But the utter fearlessness which she exhibited, even while his knife-point rested upon her bosom, needing only a straightening of his nervous arm to send the polished steel home to her heart, disarmed him far more surely and quickly than the most eloquent pleading and protestations.

The rigid muscles relaxed, the weapon dropped back upon the table, and the half-vacant laugh parted his lips.

"Good girl, Belle! I was only trying your nerve, to see if it was all you boasted. I am satisfied, now. You're pure quill! Not a man in all Rocky Bar would have stood the test without turning a hair, but you did!"

"You were foolish to doubt me, even for a moment, Saint," was the quiet comment.

St. Clair Guthrie poured out another drink, and insisted on the woman's joining him as he drank bitter confusion to all their enemies. This was a new phase in his character, to her, for never before had she seen him the worse for liquor, much less so nearly drunk as now; but Belle was shrewd and keen-witted, and readily fell in with his humor. They drank the toast, then the gambler, forgetting his short-lived suspicions, spoke more freely than before.

"I never forgot the words my father spoke when the rope was closing around his throat. I swore that I would perform the duty which he left me, and for that reason I hired a man to come here and get him into a wager that he would capture Captain Slyboots, and break up his gang of Anti-Monopolists. I meant to set a trap for him with that bait, but the word which Gordon brought me changed my plans. I saw how I could make a double stroke, and I set the wires to working. Everything went exactly as I wished, and I was not sorry that I had made a failure of it last night—"

"Then it was you who fired that shot at Dan Brown? I felt pretty confident of that, though it is not like you to miss a target of that size."

"The moonlight deceived me, and I overshot a trifle; but I am glad now that I did. It would be too easy a death for the devil; he shall stretch hemp, just as he was the prime cause of my father's doing, and as he chokes I will hiss into his ears the bitter truth—I'll tell him who trailed him down to death, and what for—"

"When he can still comprehend, but too late for the lips to repeat—make sure of that, Saint! You have two lives now—your own and mine!"

"Did you ever know me to bungle a job which I undertook? Be sure I won't this one—the biggest, heaviest one of my life. But hold your tongue; you throw me off the track, and I want to talk straight. It relieves my brain. I kept it in so long, thought it all over so many times, that it's swelling too big for one head to contain. It's all solid enough, but somehow it makes a powerful lot of gas—"

He checked himself abruptly, glaring with drunken suspicion into the darkly beautiful face before him. He seemed dimly conscious that he was making a fool of himself, that he was talking wildly, incoherently, and, with a powerful effort, he dissipated the mists which confused his brain.

"Old Gordon gave me the clues to work on," he said, more deliberately, more coherently, "and I lost little time. I told Tim Topliff the part he was to play, and he did it well—too well, I began to think, for his coming put a stop to the row which would have removed that cursed Nor' West Nick, without giving us any more trouble. I was out of town, or that stroke engineered by old Ovelman might have panned out better. But it don't matter. The end will be the same after all."

"Got up as it was, on the spur of the moment, I am proud of that plan—prouder, still, of the manner in which it was carried out. I don't often boast, but I'm entitled to, now."

"One whispered word to Turley was enough, and he started for the Jealous Girl, giving Nor' West Nick a taste of his knife as he passed. He saw Topliff, and arranged for the attack. It was made—two fools who had begun to suspect the honest Tim, were laid out for a double funeral, and a double purpose: to make the affair seem more like the pure quill, and guard against their talking too loud for the health of their foreman."

"Topliff—bold fellow!—ran the terrible gantlet, and carried the news to Dan Brown. That gentleman fell headlong into the trap, and when they were before the ambush laid by Turley, Tim tapped the man from Denver on the head, and tumbled him out of the saddle. The boys took him in charge, and lugged him up into the hills, where they trussed him to a tree, with his eyes blindfolded."

"They followed my orders to the very letter, though Turley, grim old wolf, acknowledged that it went sorely against the grain to have the bloodhound in their power and yet leave him alive, unhurt, save for the lump on his head where Topliff kicked him over. But Captain Slyboots had spoken, and they dare not cross his will!"

He ceased speaking, and his head began to droop. The powerful liquor, so freely swallowed, was beginning to have its revenge. Belle moved uneasily, as though anxious to hear more, but the hint was unheeded, and regardless of what had happened only a few minutes before, she said:

"Surely they did not turn him loose? A merciless tiger like Dan Brown! And after treating him so roughly!"

"Yes, and no!" laughed the drunken gambler. "They kept him prisoner, yet they set him free. There's an enigma for you, old girl! Think you can solve it?"

The woman slowly shook her head.

"That's because you've seen only a few of my cards. Wait until I give you a peep at the rest; then you'll say that I'm playing them for all that's out, and must rake the pot."

"As I said, Brown was kept blindfolded, and his ears were of more service to him than his eyes, for the boys twisted their tongues until they could not recognize their own voices when they gave tongue. I can swear to that, for I was with them, from the start, to make sure there was no mistake."

"I gave Turley his orders, then took Topliff and left, to carry out the rest of my plans. I gave him a note to Arthur Ovelman, written as nearly like Dan Brown's fist as I could manage it, and sent him to town. You know how he played his part, and brought the old man back with him to the shanty, where I was all ready to play the part of Dan Brown—easy enough to do, thanks to the interior of the cabin's being so dark, there under the shadow of the mountain."

"It was a nasty job, that I'll admit, but the stakes were too big to be lost for a silly scruple, and I wiped him out. Not for the money alone, though that was enough to buy a score of lives, each one more valuable than that of the old speculator. His death should be avenged—on Dan Brown!"

"I secured the stamps, then fixed up Tim Topliff, so the story he was to tell would go down with the crowd. I didn't use a pistol for fear of accidents, but made a neat counterfeit with my knife and a bit of wire. It was hard on Tim, but the fellow showed good grit, and kept thinking of the gold which would save over his hurts."

"Then it came time for Wilkins to play a card, which he had been leading up to all day long, and he did it so well that the two fellows who were with him never once suspected that the tragedy was a farce, so far as he was concerned. They brought poor, honest, abused Tim to town, and the admirable manner in which the rascal played his part almost brought tears to my eyes—his reluctance to inform on the man whom he loved better than a brother, even after being so shamefully betrayed—was better than a circus."

"Now I begin to see the end!" exclaimed Belle, the admiration in her face and tones being tinged with something like awe as she looked into the face of the master-plotter. "I never met a man who could have planned all that and carried it out, too, in so short a time, save you, Saint!"

"I am not ashamed of it myself," he admitted, frankly. "It seems terribly tangled up, at first glance, but as you study it closer, you see how neatly every item dovetails into the other. And when the key-pin is shoved into place, I defy any one to detect crack or flaw, though they use a microscope!"

"That key-pin is Dan Brown, of course?" ventured Belle.

"Yes; he has his little part to speak, when the curtain will descend to red fire and slow music," laughed the exultant gambler. "You can imagine the tableau—Dan Brown of Denver's first and last appearance in his remarkable feat of dancing a jig in mid-air!"

"If he comes back," cautiously ventured Belle. "He may scent danger in the air and travel in the other direction."

"I thought of that, and have guarded against it. If he turns his face in any other direction than Rocky Bar, he will be taken prisoner by those whom I left to watch him from under cover, and brought here to answer for the murder of Arthur Ovelman. But there is little danger of that. He will be so wrought up by the indignities put upon him by the boys, that when he finds his hands at liberty he will hasten here to get even with them and me. That will be about daylight, if Turley was careful in carrying out my instructions."

"It is growing late—morning will be here soon—yet you are here drinking!" said Belle, her face paling, her eyes glistening more vividly than ever. "Are you mad, Saint? When the biggest game of your life is almost won, will you lose it for a little brandy? The stuff which I have often heard you say was the gambler's curse?"

"That's all right—rop it now. One thing—you brag of your skill with drugs. Can you give me something that will make me sleep like a log for two or three hours? I must have some rest, but I must be afoot when Dan Brown pulls hemp. If you can do that, give me a dose. If not, douse me with cold water the moment day begins to break. You understand?"

"I can do what you ask, Saint," smilingly replied the woman, rising and touching her warm lips to his brow. "I will prepare the medicine, and then will watch over you until it is time to awaken you."

"All right—hurry up," he muttered, his head sinking upon his arms as they lay crossed upon the table.

"Keep awake, dear; I'll be back in a moment."

There was no answer as she turned and glided from the room, and though she speedily returned, the gambler was in a heavy stupor, rather than slumber.

Placing the glass containing the compound on the table, she raised his head and shook him into semi-consciousness. Like a little child he swallowed the draught, then hung heavily upon her arm.

For a moment she paused, at a loss what to do, then she brought a blanket and pillow, placing them on the floor, after which, with no little trouble, she dragged him from his chair and straightened him out comfortably, his hands crossed upon his chest.

How long he remained thus, the gambler never knew, but at length he was awakened by a sense of suffocation, and opening his eyes he beheld—the bruised and battered face, the huge, twisted mustaches and the glittering pig-eyes of Norton Weston Nickerson, showing over the leveled barrel of a cocked revolver! And the fat claimant squatted on his stomach, while in a husky, unpleasant voice he croaked:

"Lay still, ye cantankerous critter! Squirmin' n'r wigglin' won't save ye now! I've got ye whar the wool's mighty short, an' nothin' shorter then grim death kin break my grip!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

NOR' WEST NICK'S SURPRISE-PARTY.

LOUD and thunderously rolled and reverberated the huge Chinese gong with which the boarders at

the Arlington House were thrice each day summoned to their meals. Back from the frowning rocks which hemmed in the little valley came the echoes, strangely twisted and distorted by their struggle with a thousand rival echoes which found birth among the crooked canyons and devious defiles—but high above them all rose a human voice, chanting a strange and curious morning hymn:

"Roll up, tumble up, any way to git up—jest so ye don't slip up an' miss yer fust an' only chainece o' feasting yer eyes an' regaling yer ears on the marvelous marvels an' wonderful wonders, which air jest now ready for to be exhibited an' explained to yer limited comperestandin' by yours truly, Nor' West Nick, the forked-tail hummin' bird o' Rocky Bar! Right this way, ladies an' gents! 'Mission free, an' children only hafe-price. Box-sheets open, an' ef ye lose another minnit ye ain't got no show fer a front seat in the dress circle. Fust an' only chainece fer to see the great ge-wholloppin' piny-piny-popy-poppy-show—the greatest gatherration o' livin' an' movin' wax-works which the mighty past ever will, or the glorious futur' ever did gaze upon—amen!"

At each period came a resounding thump on the gong, and those huge, fiery-red mustaches kept fantastic time to the tongue which wagged so nimbly beneath them—for the speaker was none other than Norton Weston Nickerson, self-styled Nor' West Nick.

Day had fairly dawned over Rocky Bar, though the sun had not yet made its appearance above the hills to the east. It was an hour earlier than the usual time set for the gong to warn Colonel Gordon's boarders, but this might not have created remark, only for the fantastic words and actions of the fat claimant. His stentorian tones aroused every soul within the confines of Rocky Bar, and soon the space before the Arlington House was crowded with laughing, wondering citizens.

"Tention, ladies an' gen's an' young-uns, ef any sech trundle-bed trash thar be within the scope o' my gen'le fish-horn! Business is business, an' Nor' West Nick is its prophet! I've got the almighty circus to show ye here, free, gratis, fer nothin', without a pesky red cent to pay—but at the same time, it's a show that won't stan' more'n one boss, an' that king-bird is the same chicken which now addresses you all. Look an' listen—that's all right! Try to help pull the wires which move the puppets, an' the band will play a walk-around—Let 'em hev a squint at your music-boxes, critters!" he added, with a wave of his hand.

Out from the open door behind him, through the open windows were thrust the muzzles of rifles and revolvers. Back of these were dimly seen forms, but the gloom was too great inside the building for the startled and amazed citizens to distinguish faces.

"What 're you trying to get through you, anyhow?" demanded a voice from the crowd.

"Straight talk, an' that's jest what I like," said the fat claimant, with a nod of approval. "Cause it's what I use my own self. Never waste one word when two kin be slung in."

"Open your ears, now, 'cause I'm goin' to fill 'em chuck-full o' the dog-dingest news you ever sucked in! Heap o' dirty work bin goin' on right under your blessed noses, o' late, an' nary one o' ye smoked the truth o' it. Tuck a white man from 'way up the divide to git at the bottom o' the blackest, foulest, loudest-smellin' pool o' nat'ral cussedness that ever festered on the face o' the airth—"

"Cut it short!" came a short, impatient voice from the shadows which veiled the "orchestra."

"Tention, citizens o' Rocky Bar! The lecture is over, an' fust one o' the wax-works will show its sweet mug."

A flourish of his arms, and out from the open door moved three human shapes, one held or supported between two others. Black crows concealed the features of the latter, but the other was visible to all, and a cry of mingled wonder and anger arose from the crowd as they recognized the sport of Rocky Bar—St. Clair Guthrie!

"Hear ye hev him, big as life an' twicet as nat'ral," commented the fat showman, with a bland smile. "You all think ye know him, but ef I didn't b'long to the church, I'd bet a nickel that you'd say he was St. Clair Guthrie!"

"What has he done? What does this mean, anyhow?" demanded the same man who had questioned the fat showman before. "Who put those irons on his wrists—for what crime?"

"Take him back, gents, afore the risin' sun sp'iles his 'plexion," said Nickerson, with a wave of his hand, and the gambler disappeared with his guards.

"You axed a question, I b'lieve, Mr. Anderson—an' now I'll answer you, chuck-up! That moral wax-work which you jest clapped your two peepers onto, is the great an' only 'riginal Cap'n Slyboots! I kin prove what I say. Next!"

Out from the shadow came Tim Toplift, his head bandaged, his face pale as that of a ghost, his wrists connected by handcuffs. The two cowed guards held him by the shoulders on either side, their free hands holding cocked revolvers.

"Head up an' toes out, Timotheus Toplifticus! Speak to the gents an' ladies, an' tell 'em how 'shamed you be o' the sp'ilt taffy which you gave 'em last night. Tell 'em the true Gospil o' Arthur Ovelman an' St. Clair Guthrie."

In mute amazement and growing bewilderment the citizens drank in the words which fell from the lips of the self-convicted traitor and perjurer. No need to repeat them here. The truth has been sufficiently exposed for the comprehension of all—enough that he made a clean breast of the whole affair, clearing Dan Brown of the damning suspicion which had been cast upon him by the devilishly cunning arts of the arch-plotter, St. Clair Guthrie. He admitted being a member of the Anti-Monopolists, and swore that St. Clair Guthrie was none other than the redoubtable Captain Slyboots himself.

A wave of the hand, and he was taken back. Another signal, and Colonel Gordon was brought forth to confess that he also was a member of the outlaw band, though his part was mainly in spying out the secrets of his guests. He, too, made free and open confession, then gave place to Wilkins, who was in turn followed by others, until the gaping congregation could hardly have told whether they stood upon their feet or their heads.

The cap-sheaf came when the woman, Belle,

guarded like the others, but without the degrading manacles, stood revealed.

She spoke rapidly, but without the slightest trace of emotion, unless the glittering, reddish light in her dark eyes could be called such. She freely acknowledged her connection with St. Clair Guthrie, and that she had long known that he was the notorious outlaw, Captain Slyboots.

She had been true to the gambler, until she found that he meant to play her false; then she struck first. She drew him on to confess all his crimes and cunning plots, in the hearing of the gentleman who was so deeply interesting them with his little surprise-party. She gave him a drug which, while it counteracted the effects of the brandy he had swallowed, held him fast locked in slumber until he was wanted. Through her arts Captain Slyboots was captured, and as soon as she could secure the rewards offered for his apprehension, or such portion thereof as she might be entitled to, she would bid Rocky Bar adieu—

The fat showman waved his hand, disgust plainly imprinted on his battered countenance, and the woman was taken back into the house.

"Gents," he said, bowing low, with an apologetic air, "I counted on showin' you one o' my greatest attractions in the moral wax-work line, but onhappily I'm disa'p'inted, all owin' to the onreasonable-ness of the contrary critter in turnin' toes up an' kickin' the bucket; but I'll do the best I kin."

The masked guards came forth, bearing between them the limp, nerveless figure of a corpse. They lowered their burden, then raised his head so that the face was distinctly visible.

A low murmur ran through the crowd, as they recognized all that remained of Dave Nichols, the giant claimant!

"He never was noted fer his beauty o' face or spirit," said Nickerson, eying the corpse critically. "Nur that slit in his cazeza don't improve his handsome any to speak of, though it's done wonders fer his goodness, an' though you moughtent think it, thar lays a thoroughly reformed character!"

"Some three hours ago, more or less, he crept up abind the gent what makes a livin' ridin' fiery, untamed black bulls o' the long-horned Texan variety, an' tried to ventilate his 'natomy with a bowie. He didn't quite do it, owin' to sarcumstances over which he didn't hev no control—a sarcumstance jest 'leven inches in the blade. That sarcumstance was gripped in this grub-hook. I did it to save a man—an' I saved two on em! That beauty, who won't never no more splatter disgrace all over the honorable name o' Nor' West Nick, an' this yar gent—Kyrle Dando, Double Xquire!"

The head of the dead giant was lowered, and the two guards flung aside the crows which they no longer needed, revealing the faces of Dan Brown of Denver and he whom the citizens of Rocky Bar had thus far known as Nor' West Nick.

The last-named stepped to the side of the fat claimant, and rested one hand upon his shoulder as he spoke:

"Citizens of Rocky Bar, I, too, have a confession to make. This seems to be a general unmasking, and I will follow suit. For reasons of my own, I gave my name as Nor' West Nick. I now renounce all claim to the title, and transfer it to the rightful owner—this gentleman—who has brought order out of chaos, who has unmasked the guilty, righted the wronged."

"And I also wish to say a word before the curtain is drawn on this little surprise-party," said Dan Brown of Denver. "I own up beaten at my own trade. I knew that Mr. Dando was masquerading under false colors, and I believed that he was Captain Slyboots, playing a lone hand for some end which I could not exactly make out. I concluded to pit my wits against his, and for fear of having the triumph wrested from me, I backed him when you rose to have a lynching-bee. Then the man whom we have known all along as Mr. Dando scented it out. He shot the fellows—members of the outlaw gang—who had been left to guard me, and then we joined teams with the genuine Nor' West Nick—who, by the way, is not near as handsome when he comes out of the shell which he has seen fit to don, for this occasion only—and the rest you know."

"The great an' only moral wax-work show is over, gents, an' afore tharkin' you fer your kind attention an' trooly liberal patronage, I've got jest one more word to say."

"I ain't no hog, ef I do look mightily like one in this dandy rig-out. A powerful sight o' the work was done fer me, by the men what I sent on ahead fer to spy out the lay o' the land. Them I mean makes part o' our orchestra thar; the rest is men picked from your own ranks. 'Cause why; we didn't know but what you mought take another lynchin' idee into your minds, an' we was determined that Cap'n Slyboots should hev a fa'r an' squar' trial, afore the proper 'thorities—an' he'll git it, too—bet you 'lifer!"

There is little more to add before we follow the example set by Nor' West Nick, and draw the curtain over this brief drama of wild life in the western mines.

While in Denver, Kyrle Dando found on the street a note-book containing the commission of Nor' West Nick, and a letter from the chief of the Rocky Mountain Detective Association, giving him full authority to use whatever means he chose to detect and break up the gang of Captain Slyboots. There was no clew to the owner of the documents, and being in a rather reckless mood, Kyrle struck out for Rocky Bar, resolved to try his hand at detective work. How this resulted, the reader has seen.

Arthur Ovelman was buried near where he met his death, and though Marjean shed many tears over the lonely grave, his treatment of her and her lover partially weakened the shock, and her old-time cheerfulness and beauty were not long in returning, particularly as Kyrle became convinced that she had not willingly or wittingly sinned against him.

But this is a story in itself, too long to relate here. Enough that the truth of that pretended forgery came out, through the tool which Arthur Ovelman had made use of, and with his name cleared, with a loving wife and steadily growing business in the same place from whence he had fled a condemned felon, Kyrle Dando is as happy as though his life had always flowed smoothly and peacefully.

Dan Brown of Denver is still in harness, though he follows his perilous profession through choice, not necessity.

Nor' West Nick still flourishes, though he does little in the thief-catching line at present, preferring to develop the wonderful resources of the "Jealous Girl," which he secured on easy terms from Dan Brown, and at this writing he is a power in the land—of Rocky Bar.

Captain Slyboots was brought to trial, and with the overwhelming proof against him—for Tim Toplift was admitted as evidence against him, as well as the woman, Belle—the result was certain from the outset. He died as he had lived, cool and iron-nerved, game to the last.

As for the part which he had played in conjunction with Dave Nichols, when Arthur Ovelman had that unpleasant experience in the old cellar, Nor' West Nick frankly confessed to Kyrle Dando, as "prospective heir" to the speculator's worldly goods, that he had "done evil for good's sake."

He was confident that Dave Nichols was connected in some manner with the gang of Captain Slyboots, and in hopes of getting a hold on him, through which he could coax or frighten the truth out of him, he concocted the plot which was so audaciously carried out. By Dando's advice, Marjean never knew what her unfortunate parent had undergone at their hands, and the money which Nor' West Nick returned was considered a part of the plunder which St. Clair Guthrie obtained by his cold-blooded assassination.

THE END.

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